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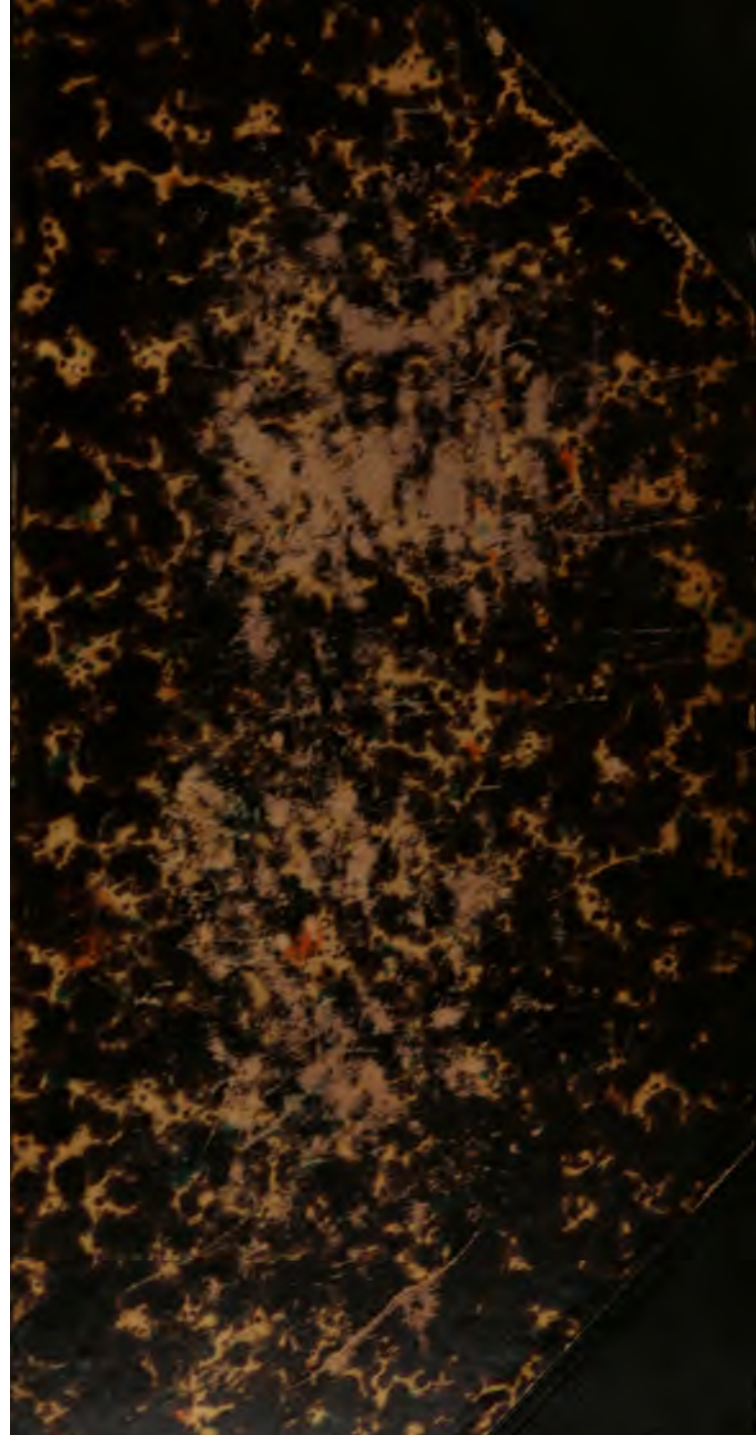
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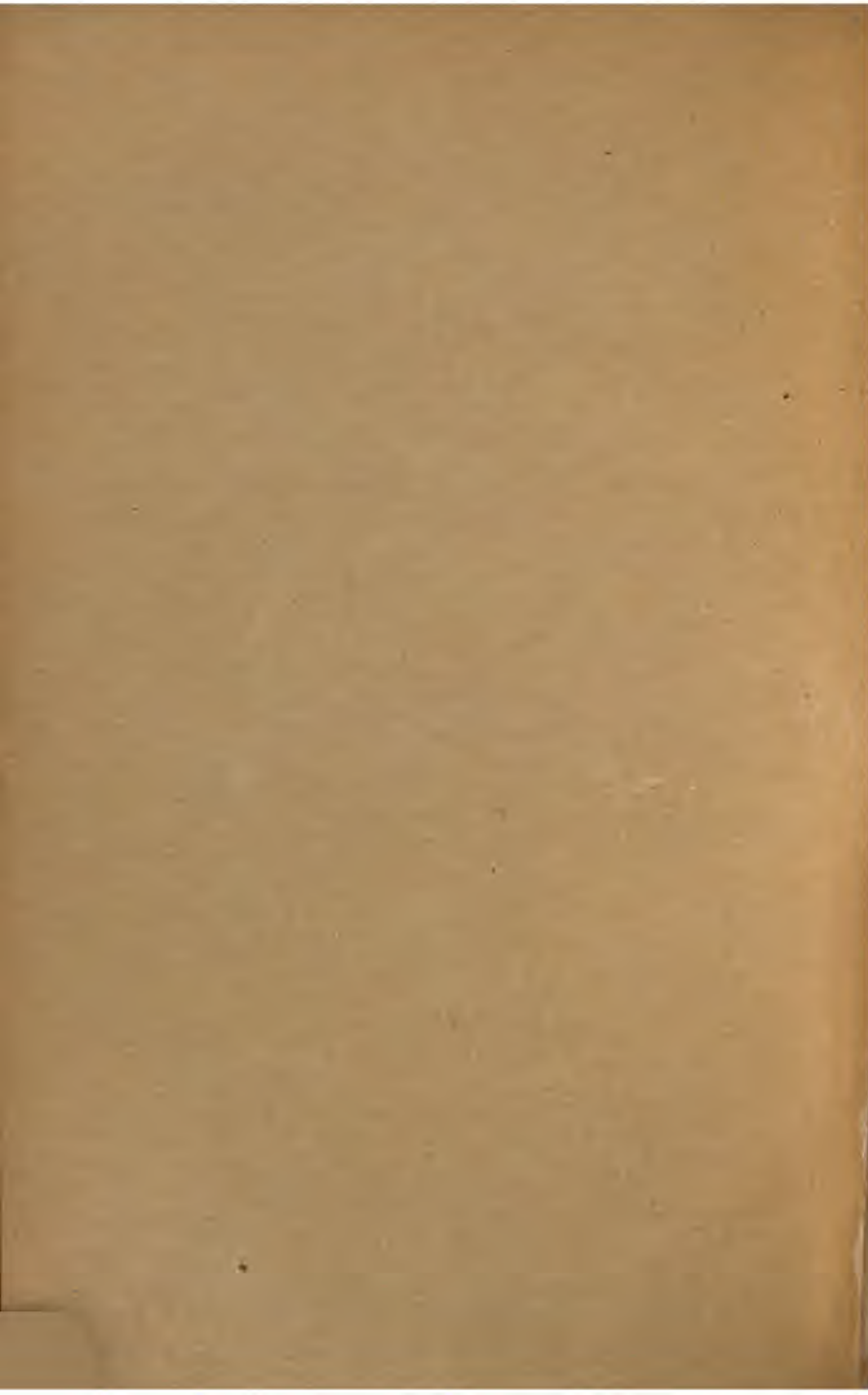
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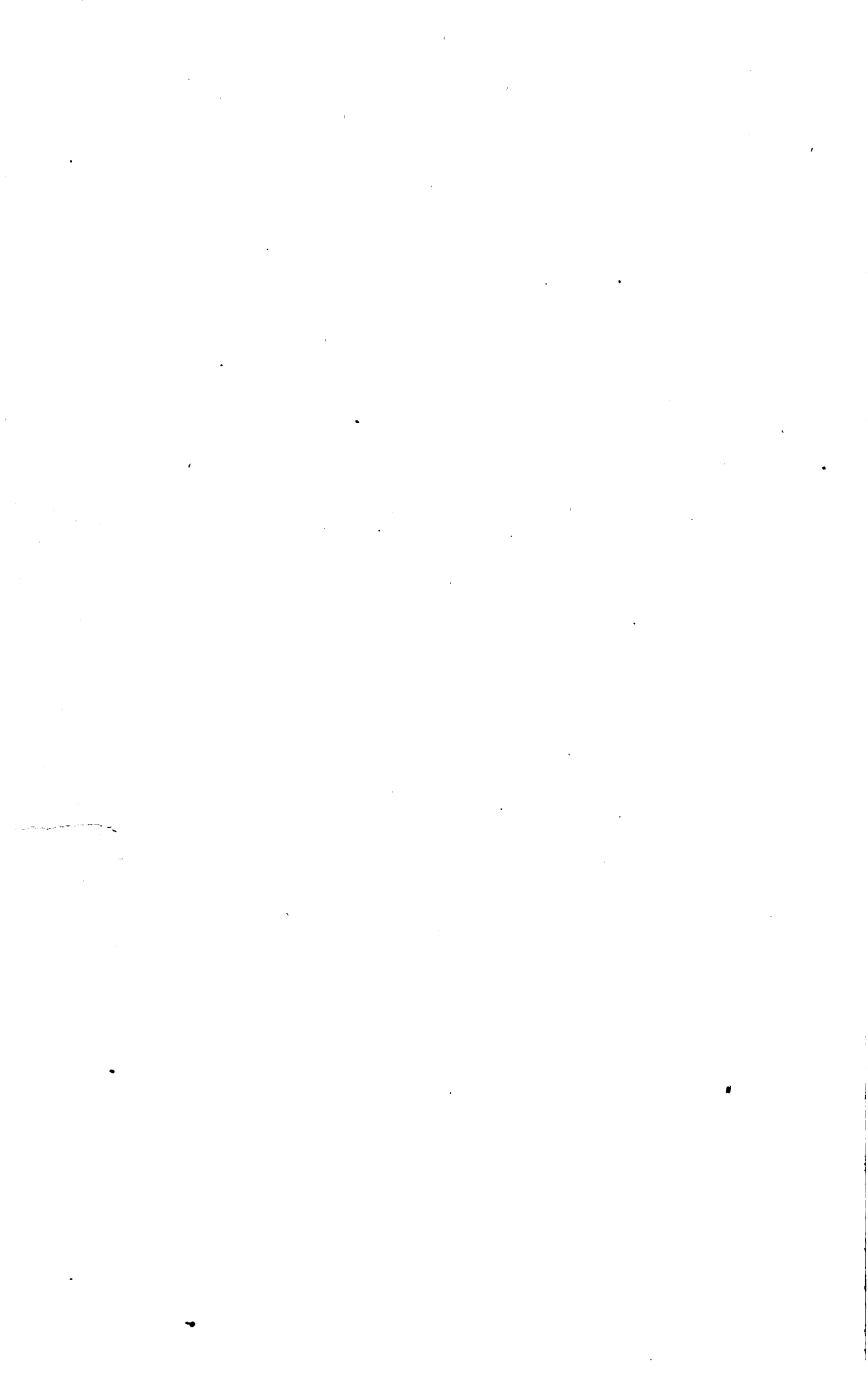
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THE LIFE AND WORKS  
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GOTTHOLD EPHRAIM LESSING.

FROM THE GERMAN OF ADOLF STAHR.

BY

E. P. EVANS, PH. D.,  
PROFESSOR OF MODERN LANGUAGES AND LITERATURE IN THE  
UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN.

„Auf Lessing zurückgehen heißt jetzt — fortschreiten!“

J. G. Kühne.

77<sup>a</sup>  
VOL. I.

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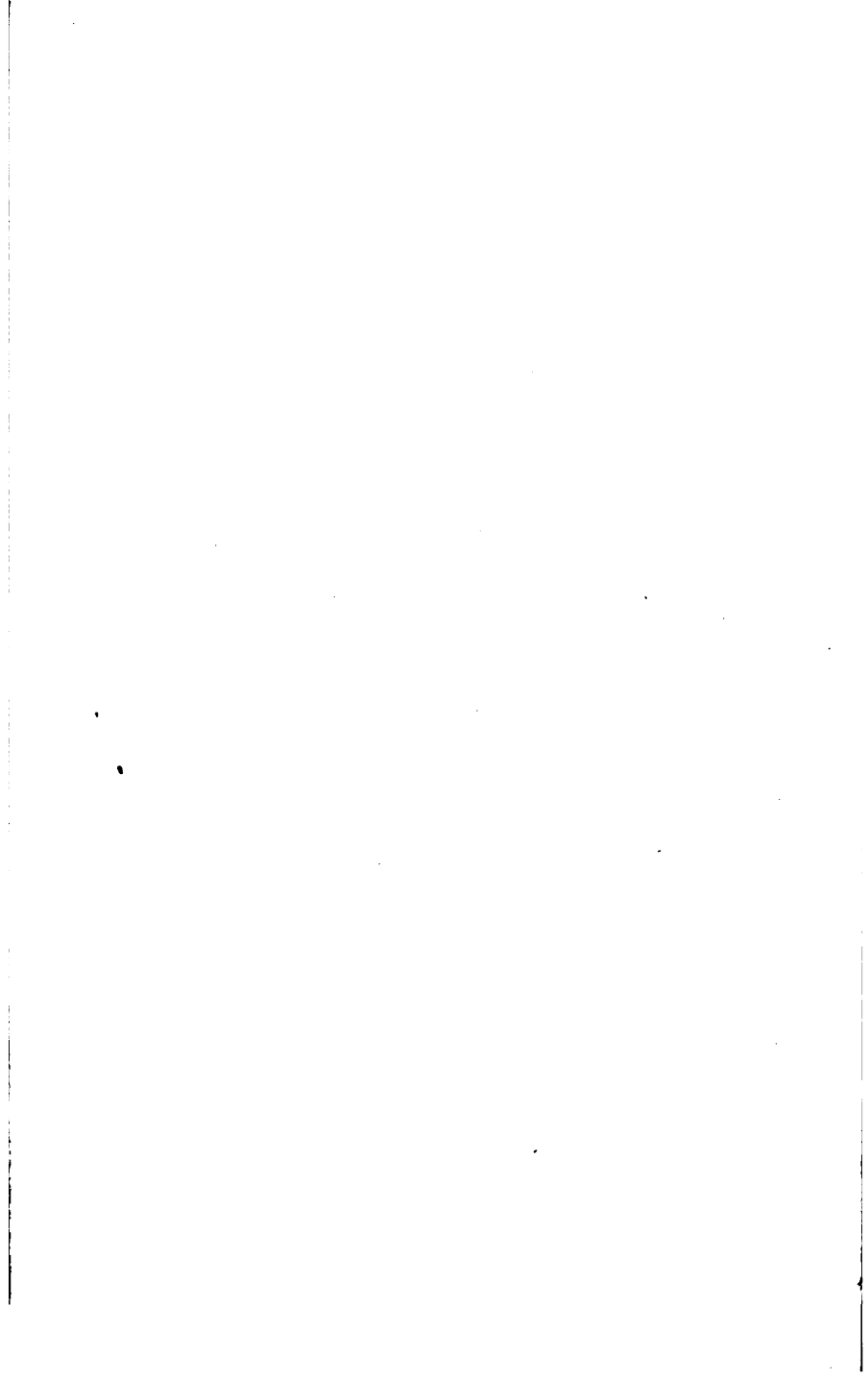
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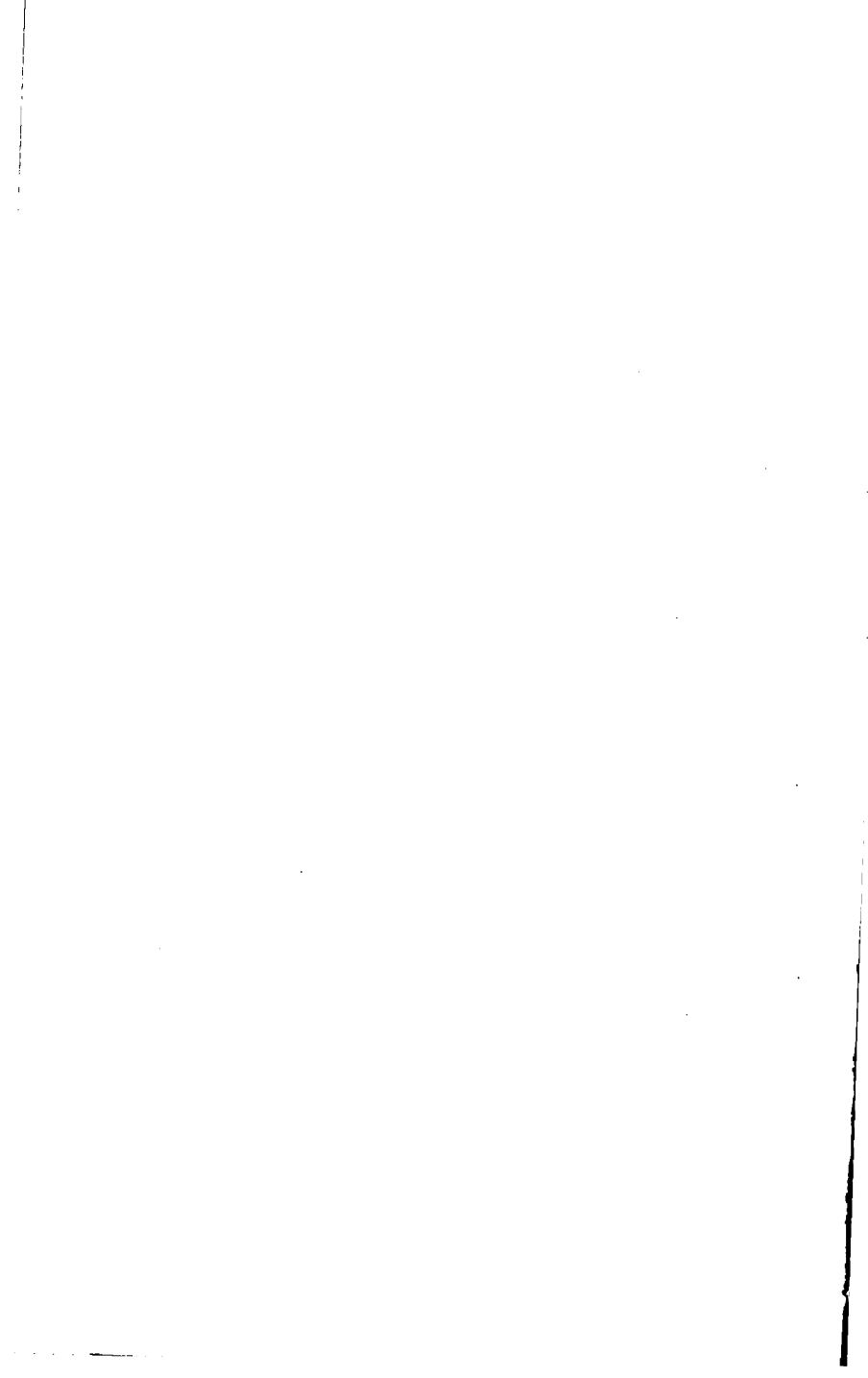
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Das echte Abbild von der Menschheit Adel,  
Der treueste Ritter aller Geisteswahrheit,  
Ihr Spiegelbild Ihr Selbst, in Sonnenklarheit,  
Der Freiheitskämpfer ohne Furcht und Tadel.

Type of the perfect man he came,  
Of highest truth the peerless knight  
(Himself her image, pure as light),  
And freedom's champion, void of blame.



## TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

---

To the cultivators of German literature Lessing needs no introduction, so entirely is he identified with its restoration and growth in what may be called its second classical period. His career begins precisely in the middle of the last century, and extends over thirty years of incessant activity and warfare against the meanness and barbarism into which German letters were then sunk. Indeed, at that time Germany had no national literature. The heroic songs of the Nibelungen and the sentimental lays of the Minnesingers were forgotten, or known only to be despised. From the era of the Reformation, poetry ceased to be national, and became servilely and drearily imitative. Even Opitz, in his famous *Buch von der deutschen Poeterey* (1624), presented to his countrymen little more than a compilation of maxims drawn from foreign models, which he declared it impossible to surpass. Critics like Bodmer and Breitinger, and poets like Von Haller and Gellert, had made honest and patriotic efforts to resist the prevalent Gallomania; but their opposition was radically feeble, and also too remote to effect much against the powerful influence of Gottsched.

who then sat enthroned at Leipsic as the autocrat of taste, and against the weight of whose authority Klopstock was just struggling up into recognition. The learned world was divided into two classes: courtiers, who wrote French, and academicians, who wrote Latin; whilst German remained "the language of horses." Wolff was the first German scholar who discussed literary and philosophical topics in his mother-tongue; but his writings were too scholastic, both in material and form, to interest the nation at large; whilst the elegant Latinity of Leibnitz, great as were his intellectual powers and the impulse which he gave to scientific thought, exerted, from the very nature of the case, no influence in moulding the popular mind and improving the popular taste.

Such was the state of affairs when Lessing appeared as the representative of his nation in the republic of letters, and as the great leader in that revolution which freed the German mind from French domination, and created one of the noblest literatures of modern times. This he did by applying philosophy — by which is to be understood, in a large sense, "the science of grounds and principles — to literature and the fine arts; an idea which expresses accurately what the Grecians meant by criticism." \* Thus he was, as Gervinus truly says, *der grosse Wegweiser der Nation* — the great finger-post, pointing in every direction, and guiding men of the most varied aims and characters — Herder, Goethe, Lichtenberg, Spittler, and Frederic Schlegel — each into the right way. By writing German, he not only addressed himself directly to the whole nation, but, at the same time, gave to it

\* De Quincey.

the first model of a classical prose, which has been excelled by none and approached by few. "His intellect," says Lewes, "like his style, was clear, sharp, precise; he would tolerate no vagueness, and he hated rhetoric; a keen, analytic, healthy intellect, practical in all its aims, decisive in its movement, inspired by the sincerest love of truth, but never inspired by imagination." This love of truth was indeed the passion of his soul, and he strove after it with a singleness and simplicity of purpose that extorted admiration even from his adversaries. His nature was free from the faintest taint of the partisan or the theorist. He was everywhere the high-minded as well as broad-minded man of letters. "I hate," he says, "from the bottom of my heart, all who wish to found sects; it is not error in itself that makes the misfortune of men, but sectarian error, or even sectarian truth, were it possible for the truth to form a sect." His great enemies were dogmatism and intolerance, whether under the form of rationalism or of orthodoxy. These he fought with iconoclastic wit and pitiless logic. His reading was immense, but he assimilated and elaborated it all; thus his knowledge led to insight, and his vast learning was transmuted into the highest order of intellectual wisdom. In no other scholar do we find so much pure gold of erudition mingled with so little dross of pedantry. He disclaimed the title of poet, but his works, as Goethe said, testify against his words. His poetry was not like that of the harper in Wilhelm Meister, who sang, "as the bird sings," from the mere impulse of song, but it was the clear and conscious product of the intellect. It looked to the end, and had a distinct



purpose, serving to inculcate some precept of morals, to enforce some rule of conduct, or to illustrate some principle of criticism. Nevertheless, according to Julian Schmidt, "Minna von Barnhelm is still the best German comedy, and Emilia Galotti, artistically considered, the best German tragedy." The truth is, we are apt to think less of his poetic genius because it is not a salient faculty, but is rounded off and lost sight of in the wonderful symmetry of his character and in the grandeur of his general powers.

Lessing has been frequently called the Luther of the eighteenth century; and this appellation is perfectly just, so far as it refers to the spirit of the men and the services which they rendered in the enfranchisement of modern thought. They both asserted the sovereignty of individual reason and the right of free examination, in opposition to tradition and authority. Lessing achieved for literature, in combating the arbitrary rules of French taste, what Luther accomplished for religion in combating papal decrees and church pretensions. And in the province of theology, also, Lessing is the real successor to Luther, since he continued the great reformer's work by carrying out, to its legitimate conclusion, the fundamental principle of Protestantism, which is absolute freedom of inquiry. It was in this sense that he appealed from bibliolatry to reason, from the letter of the Scripture to the spirit of Christianity. Inherited ready-made truths he declares to be of no value to the individual mind; it is "the one inward impulse after truth" that ennobles the man and enlarges his powers. "The chase is always worth more than the

quarry." Even the gospel of Christ he esteems rather for the love of truth which it inspires than for the actual truth which it teaches. From this stand-point, and in this spirit, he drew that clear line of demarcation between religion and theology, which restored to the former its pure and practical beneficence, as a light in the soul, needing no "apologies" for its existence, and secured to the latter its freedom and dignity, as a field of independent and illimitable investigation. His "Education of the Human Race," a little essay of a hundred paragraphs, is a complete philosophy of religion *in nuce*; a theodicy in which, not by poetical but by historical argument, he

"may assert eternal providence,  
And justify the ways of God to men."

No theological student can fail to be interested in this conception of revelation, as God's method of education, by which mankind is gradually developed, out of an infantine state of feticism (whether the fetish be a stick, a graven image, a black stone, a ceremony, or an unintelligible dogma), into the divine evangelism of love and the purely spiritual worship of the one heavenly Father. Whatever objections may be brought against such a theory, it has this, at least, to commend it—that it leaves no place for religious persecution and proselytism, since every system of religion, as a link in the golden chain, is equally genuine. Tolerance is the necessary corollary of this idea of the progressive evolution and perfectibility of revelation as an impelling, guiding, and illuminating principle in the intellectual development of the race; while, on the other hand, proscription and inquisition,

the prison and the pyre, are logical deductions from the assumption of any one revelation as perfectly, absolutely, and exclusively true, in comparison with which all others are not only errors, but also impostures. It was to illustrate these tendencies, and to set forth these practical consequences, that Lessing wrote the polemical drama *Nathan the Wise*, in which the broad tolerance and noble humanity of the Jew are contrasted with the proselyting importunacy of Dajah, the fierce zealotry of the patriarch, and the perplexities of the simple-minded friar, whose kindly instincts revolt at cruelty, but who remains the tool of ecclesiastical tyranny, because he cannot escape the syllogistic necessity of burning the bodies of heretics for the weal of their souls.

In the acute and comprehensive spirit with which Lessing handled æsthetical subjects, we have an additional evidence of the vigor and versatility of his genius. In art-criticism his *Laokoön* still remains an unrivalled masterpiece. It is, perhaps, the most characteristic of his works, inasmuch as the nature of the discussion brought out in high relief the strong analytic tendency of his mind, and the pure, antique clearness of his style. What he did was to rectify the boundaries of different species—an apparently negative service, yet rich in the most positive results for the development of a national literature. The line of separation which he drew between the speaking arts and the imaging arts has never been disturbed. He fixed the limits of poetry and painting as different modes of representation, and at once set aside the *ut pictura poesis* of Simonides, which had just received the indorsement of

the great Winckelmann. The fruitfulness of this "splendid thought," as Goethe calls it, is seen in all the subsequent literature of Germany; and it is also true that a knowledge of the principles herein established would have forestalled many errors, both of theory and practice, in our own criticism and poetry.

Such is a *silhouette* of the man whose life and labors are portrayed in the present work, to the preparation of which the author has devoted twenty years of earnest and enthusiastic study: We believe that in the New, as in the Old World, it will come as a stimulus and welcome aid to the free and forming minds of this generation in all those vital investigations which aim to penetrate the thick accumulations of routine thinking and accredited systems, and build upon the granite of fundamental facts and first principles. Every soul that is willing to receive the light of universal truth, even to the dispersion of any little private darkness and *dunkel* of its own, though it may reject many of Lessing's opinions, cannot but sympathize with the liberal and lofty tone of his thought, whether directed towards historical inquiry, or literary criticism, or philosophical and theological speculations. What is here offered is not only a sketch of the personal character, but also an account of the campaigns of this soldier of humanity in his warfare against all forms of Philistinism; how incessantly and nobly he battled against the votaries of Dagon, and threw, not cool pebbles from the brook, but hot shot, into the very headquarters of Goliath.

As regards the translation, the endeavor has been to make it at once faithful and idiomatic; how far this end

has been attained, it remains for competent critics to decide.

With these prefatory words, this *Life of Lessing* is presented to the American public, in the hope that it may incite some to a further study of the literature of which he is the modern father; or at least induce them to cultivate a closer acquaintance with his writings, which, unlike those of even the greatest of his contemporaries, have suffered no abrasion from the waves of time. Thus they will be better enabled to appreciate the immense scope of his activity and his influence, and will be astonished to learn in how many respects those bold words of Kühne, which form the motto of our title-page, still remain true, that "to go back to Lessing is—to make progress!"

E. P. E.

UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN,  
September 25, 1866.

# CONTENTS

## TO VOLUME FIRST.

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### BOOK FIRST.

HOME.—SCHOOL.—UNIVERSITY. 1729-1748.

	PAGE
CHAPTER I. The Home. . . . .	3
II. The School. . . . .	17
III. The University. . . . .	33

### BOOK SECOND.

FIRST EFFORTS.—BERLIN AND WITTENBERG.  
1748-1752.

CHAPTER I. Lessing and the Family. . . . .	63
II. Literary Enterprises. . . . .	71
III. Lessing as Feuilletonist in Berlin. . . . .	75
IV. Lessing and Voltaire in Berlin. . . . .	97
V. Lessing at Wittenberg. . . . .	113

### BOOK THIRD.

THE PERIOD OF EARLY MATURITY.—BERLIN AND  
LEIPSIC. 1753-1758.

CHAPTER I. Nicolai and Mendelssohn. . . . .	127
II. Juvenile Dramas. . . . .	137
III. Miss Sara Sampson and the Household Tragedy. . . . .	147
IV. An Attempt to travel, and its Consequences. . . . .	158
V. Literary Labors for Daily Bread. Researches into the Drama. . . . .	166

## BOOK FOURTH.

THIRD SOJOURN AT BERLIN.—THE LETTERS ON  
LITERATURE.—FABLES.—PHILOTAS.—FAUST.  
1758-1760.

	PAGE
CHAPTER I. Gleim and Kleist. . . . .	177
II. The Letters on Literature. . . . .	183
III. Lessing's Fables. Philotas. Faust. . . . .	194
IV. External Circumstances. Departure from Berlin. . . . .	202

## BOOK FIFTH.

WAR-LIFE AND WORLD-LIFE AT BRESLAU.—MINNA  
VON BARNHELM. 1760-1765.

CHAPTER I. External Circumstances. . . . .	213
II. Minna von Barnhelm. . . . .	229

## BOOK SIXTH.

FOURTH RESIDENCE AT BERLIN.—LAOKOÖN.  
1765-1767.

CHAPTER I. Return to Berlin. Conclusion of the Letters on Literature. . . . .	241
II. Lessing and Frederic the Great. . . . .	248
III. Laokoon. . . . .	261
IV. Results and Effects. . . . .	275
V. Call to Hamburg. . . . .	290

## BOOK SEVENTH.

LESSING IN HAMBURG.—THE DRAMATURGY.  
1767-1770.

CHAPTER I. The National Theatre in Hamburg. . . . .	303
II. Fate of the Dramaturgy. . . . .	317
III. Lessing and the Actors. . . . .	321
IV. The Dramaturgy and the German Drama. . . . .	337
V. The Dramaturgy and the French Drama. . . . .	350
VI. Aristotle and the Principle of Tragedy. . . . .	366
VII. Further Deductions. . . . .	374

GOTTHOLD EPHRAIM LESSING.

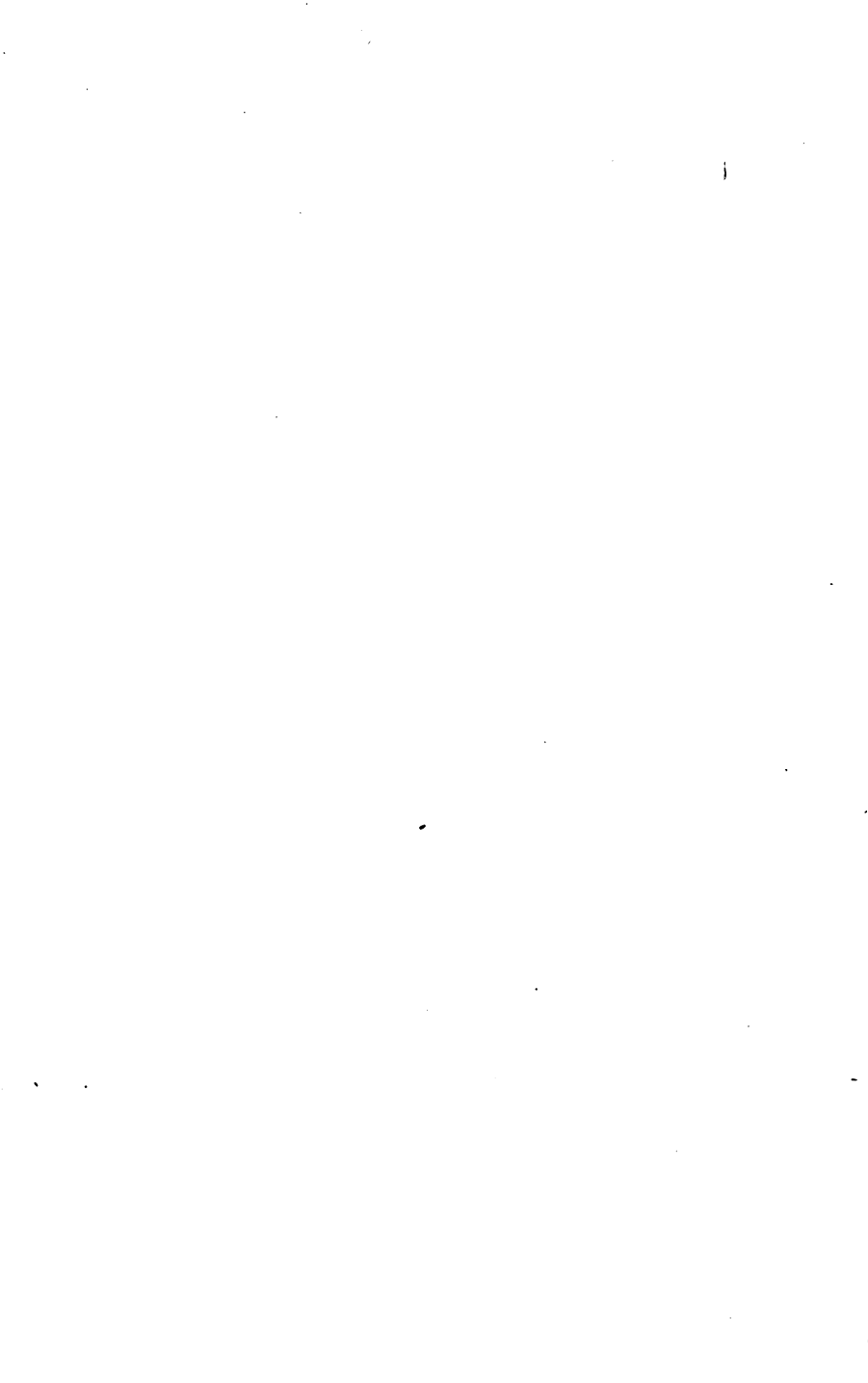
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BOOK FIRST.

HOME — SCHOOL — UNIVERSITY.

1729 — 1748.





## CHAPTER I.

### THE HOME.

**K**AMENZ, in Upper Lusatia, is one of the six cities of that province, which, by ancient alliance, succeeded, during the fifteenth century, in wresting from the German emperors and Bohemian kings the rights and privileges of imperial cities. It maintained its own troops, and fought manfully its own feuds, but, owing to its early reception of the new Protestant doctrine, suffered heavy oppression from the Emperor Ferdinand I. Severely desolated during the terrors of the Thirty Years' War, and, two generations afterwards, almost wholly destroyed by a conflagration, there remained scarcely a trace of its ancient municipal splendor, when within its walls the man was born whose name was to outshine all that departed glory.

The house in which GOTTHOLD EPHRAIM LESSING first saw the light, on the 22d of January, 1729, was destroyed, in 1842, by a fire which spared but a small portion of the city where his boyhood and youth were passed. But whilst the flames consumed this building (the old Parsonage), which the ecclesiastical incumbent, fifteen years before, had prevented from being adorned with an inscription in honor of Lessing, on the occasion of the centennial anniversary of his birth, a charitable institution, established in his memory by men who revered

his humane spirit, remained uninjured. It is not known whether the pious zealots, who know how to detect the finger of God in all such events, have taken pains to point the indications in this case. Meanwhile, the fact that, one hundred years after Lessing's birth, the successors of Götze dared to oppose in such a manner the homage which a grateful posterity showed to the author of "Nathan the Wise," proves strikingly how necessary had been the mission of the great champion of tolerance and humanity, and his life-long warfare against the enemies of both.

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing was the eldest son of John Gottfried Lessing, deacon, and afterwards pastor primarius of Kamenz. His genealogical tree, which still continues to bloom in one of the first painters of Germany, can be traced back to the sixteenth century. It shows, as ancestor, one Clemence Lessigk, Lutheran curate of the Saxon Erzgebirge, who, with others, in 1580, subscribed to the so-called *formula concordiæ*, designed to allay certain theological controversies which had arisen after the death of Luther. From this ecclesiastical progenitor the lineage passes unbroken through six generations of jurists, curates, and burgomasters of small Saxon cities, to Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, who was destined to other and higher honors.

It is, throughout, a family of literati, in the good old sense of the word; which means, men pursuing regular scientific studies in high schools and universities.

The race emigrated to Kamenz in the person of Lessing's grandfather, Theophilus Lessing, who died there, as burgomaster, at eighty years of age, one year before the birth of his famous grandson. This man must be

regarded as, in many respects, an extraordinary character. Born just before the close of the Thirty Years' War, in the small Saxon town of Schkeuditz, between Halle and Leipsic, of parents impoverished by a conflagration, and sent to the University of Leipsic with only two thalers in his pocket, he realized in the fullest degree the words of the old Latin poet, how "hard it is for youthful talent to struggle up to fame, when poverty bars the way." *"Hinc illæ volucres, hinc illæ strigines."*

But he did struggle up manfully. His knowledge, and his readiness in communicating it, recommended him as an excellent teacher to a burgomaster of Leipsic, who took him into his house as the tutor of his sons, and procured him a stipend, and was rewarded for his kindness by the pleasure of seeing one of his sons, under the guidance of his *protégé*, attain the master's degree at the early age of fourteen. The tutor himself received this honor later. He was twenty-three years old, when, after having completed his studies in philosophy and law, he defended his doctor's thesis, in 1670. The subject of this thesis was worthy of the man whose grandson was destined to write "Nathan the Wise." It was entitled "*De Religionum Tolerantiâ*," and advocated the toleration, not merely of the sects and schisms of Christianity, but of all religions whatsoever. It is interesting, as an historical fact, that a quarter of a century before the birth of the great apostle of tolerance, Voltaire, such a dissertation should have been written by a Leipsic candidate of philosophy and jurisprudence, whilst, at the same time, it throws light on the spirit in which this man must have educated his son, the father of Gotthold Ephraim.

There is a powerful influence exerted over a man's

character by a long line of similarly cultivated ancestors. The efforts and activities which are continued from generation to generation, create a certain family spirit which manifests itself as a guiding and determining force, even in those whose endowments impel them to a new and wider career. What was a studious bias in the remote ancestors of Lessing, became, in his father, a marked love of erudition. John Gottfried Lessing, in addition to his pastoral office, was a learned theologian, and, as such, held literary and scientific correspondence with the most distinguished divines of his day. He was also the author of a not inconsiderable number of theological writings. Besides, he had made a thorough study of the classical and Oriental languages, and, what was of great advantage to his son, had become master of French and English (then the principal vehicles of modern culture) to a degree very rare at that time, even amongst men holding a much higher position than that of *candidatus theologiæ*.

Among his writings we find translations of theological and historical works from both of these tongues. His course of life had been planned with reference to a university professorship ; and when, in his twenty-fifth year, he was called to a pastoral charge in his native city, and followed this call, in pious faith that he was obeying a providential intimation, his office was not for him, as for so many of his kind, the end of his studies, but only gave to them a definite direction, inasmuch as from that time the history of the church and the Reformation formed the chief object of his researches. Thus Lessing received his inclination for learning as an hereditary gift. In the very year of his father's death (1770), his joy over the

first fortunate discovery which he made as librarian at Wolfenbüttel was increased by the pleasure of communicating it to that appreciative parent. From him, too, he received an interest in theology which accompanied him through his whole life. But more than that: from earliest youth he had before him, in his father, the embodied ideal of a genuine Protestant clergyman, scientifically cultivated and untiringly investigative, as well as full of faith and piety, and free from all bigotry, whose whole theological zeal limited itself to a firm hold on the principles of the Reformation in opposition to the Papacy, and whose moral dignity and self-renouncing labors for the good of others, united to his modest contentment with a retired and humble lot, made him a model of his class. Indeed, the excellent man had need of all the patience and courage he could cultivate; for the proverb, which calls children and books the only wealth of the Protestant clergyman, was realized by him in its fullest extent. His marriage was blessed with twelve children — ten sons and two daughters. The first born was a daughter, Justina Salome, frequently mentioned in family letters, who was two years older than her illustrious brother, Gotthold Ephraim. These superabundant family blessings not only burdened the parents, who sacrificed themselves for the proper education of their boys (for that the sons of a pastor primarius must also study, was then beyond question), but also cast upon the eldest son a heavy and life-long weight of care and responsibility.

Lessing's mother, Justina Salome Feller, was the daughter of the pastor primarius of Kamenz, to whose place her husband succeeded. Thus Gotthold was de-

scended on both sides from a theological and ecclesiastical family, and his early education was in keeping with these circumstances. He was taught to pray as soon as he could lisp the first words, and received oral instruction from his father in the Bible and Catechism. The first poetry with which he was familiar consisted of the hymns used in the regular devotional exercises of the family, which he learned by heart in great numbers. The father, busied with professional duties and scholarly pursuits, lacked time, and perhaps patience, for the elementary instruction of the child, and intrusted him to a private tutor, Mylius, whose younger brother afterwards played so important a part in Lessing's university life.

At the age of eight years the boy entered the city-school of Kamenz, then flourishing anew under the energetic young rector Heinitz. But more important than the school for him were home and the family, to which, through his whole life, he was bound by the closest ties. Here the noble form of his father stands in the foreground. How Lessing loved him is shown in the sorrow that filled the strong man of forty-one at the death of the old man of seventy-six. On receiving the sad intelligence, he thus wrote to his brother: "Let us live as uprightly as he lived, in order to be ready to die as suddenly as he died: that will be the best way to honor his memory." Lessing was proud of his father as a man and as a scholar. In his first letter to Michaelis, the learned professor of Göttingen, in which he gives some account of his personal relations, he says of him, "What praise would I not bestow upon him if he were not my father! He is one of the first translators of Tillotson."

The strong self-reliance, arising from a consciousness

of honorable lineage, is a characteristic trait of the German middle class; and to Lessing belonged, in an eminent degree, the right of "the good descended from the good" to feel an honest pride in his ancestry. His family was considered among the first in the little city where they had long dwelt, and his father, the learned pastor, who wrote a history of the place, was the centre of its intellectual interests. Even the pressure of poverty, which afterwards afflicted the large household, was withheld from the boyhood of the eldest son. We see that his father was able to provide a private tutor for him; and the fact that his parents had his portrait painted in his fifth year by some Raphael of Upper Lusatia shows that they were in comfortable circumstances at that time. His brother relates a characteristic anecdote of this occasion. The painter wished to represent the boy as holding a cage, with a bird sitting in it. But this proposition excited all his childish disapproval. "You must paint me with a great, great pile of books," he said, "or I had rather not be painted at all." So the artist was obliged to yield to the little book-lover; and the parents often related to their younger children and visitors, while looking at this picture, how from his earliest years he had learned with as much pleasure as ease, and had never found a better pastime than turning over the leaves of books.\* "The child is father of the

\* This interesting portrait has recently been discovered, amongst heaps of rubbish, in the garret of the church of which Lessing's father was pastor. It is not, however, a single portrait, but a very well arranged *genre*-picture of a boy-group. On the right sits Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, apparently about seven years old, diligently occupied with a large book, while other volumes are lying beside and under the chair. On the left sits his younger brother, Theophilus (who died in 1808, in Chemnitz,



man." Lessing's natural tendencies met fortunately with favoring influences, especially in the example of his diligent father, who, shut up in his library, scarcely ever mingled with the world, even on a holiday; and by his side the boy early "learned in play to use the implements of erudition." The painter, too, who had wandered, God knows how, to this little town, gave important help in another direction, since the father engaged him as a drawing-master for his son. In after years Lessing spoke of him as not a bad artist, and as possessed of considerable erudition in things pertaining to his profession, and gratefully acknowledged that through him he had early acquired a taste for the formative arts. The name of the man whom the author of *Laokoön* could thus praise deserves to have come down to posterity.

Of Lessing's mother little is known, and we cannot trace maternal influence in his character as we find it in the lives of Goethe and Schiller and many other intellectual heroes. As the daughter of a pastor primarius, brought up in the peculiar atmosphere of her class, and afterwards the wife of a pastor primarius, she appears to have been a woman of limited intelligence, whose greatest hope was to see her sons bearers of ecclesiastical dignities and pastoral distinctions. The failure of this

as rector of a school). A lamb stands near him, which he is feeding with bread. Gotthold is very elegantly dressed in red coat and breeches, with stockings to match; his brother is similarly clad, only in black.

A correspondent in the *National-Zeitung* (1860, No. 583) says of this picture, "Lessing was perfectly right when, in mature years, he called the painter of this picture a not incapable artist. It is very remarkable how the lineaments of the man appear already traced out in the features of the child: high forehead, wide, clear, open eyes, nose broad and energetically prominent, and a cheerful smile around the mouth. He is a beautiful boy, but a boy full of pert vivacity."

hope with regard to Gotthold Ephraim was, therefore, very painful to her, and she seems never to have become perfectly reconciled to it. But, notwithstanding these narrow views, she was a most careful mother and affectionate wife, looking up to her husband as to a superior being, and helping all her life long to bear the heavy burden of care and self-renunciation necessary to procure means for the education of the numerous children. What she was in this respect is expressed in a single sentence of Lessing's, when, at a later period, in a letter to his sister, he cannot say anything better of his own wife than that she was in all things "as good at heart and true as we have always known our mother to be towards our father."

This truthfulness and goodness of heart were possessed by the father also in an eminent degree. But at the same time he was not without a certain passionate violence of temperament, which sometimes gave trouble to his wife, and which he transmitted to his son in the same degree with his other marked qualities. Lessing himself has given us an intimation of this in a few remarks, the coloring of which (as Danzel observes) illustrates the Yorick-like soliloquy which was the favorite mode of expression of that time. In the fragment of a Diary which belongs nominally to the Hamburg, but really to the Wolfenbüttel period of Lessing's life, he describes an outbreak of his "Irascibility" (as he calls it) in the following monologue, delivered on the occasion of his receiving a very provoking piece of intelligence: "Now then, my dear Irascibility! where art thou? Where dost thou hide thyself? Thou hast free field! Only break loose, bustle about bravely! Gnash

the teeth, beat the brow, bite the under lip! Whilst I really do the last, my deceased father immediately stands before me as he lived and moved. That was his wont when anything vexed him, and as often as I wish to bring him bodily before me, I have only to repeat that gesture. Indeed, when I am in any way reminded of him very vividly, I can be quite sure that, involuntarily, I am biting my under lip. Good, old boy, good! I understand thee! Thou wast so noble, and yet so choleric! How often, with a manly tear in thine eye, hast thou regretted to me that thou wast so easily excited, and in the excitement so precipitate! How often didst thou say to me, 'Gotthold, take warning by me — be on thy guard — for I fear, I fear! At least I would like to have myself improved in thee!'

We shall see hereafter that Lessing, who had the happiness of retaining his father till his own mature years, was joined with him to the last in a worthy union of child-like veneration and intellectual sympathy. In one of his earliest works, a drama called "The Freethinker," written at the age of nineteen, he endeavored to build an enduring monument to the virtues of his father in the character of the clergyman Theophanus, who, by the purity of his morals, his self-denial, and genuine Christian philanthropy, converts the freethinker Adrast to a belief in those qualities, and in the source from which they flow. So, too, in that last and ripest fruit of his genius, his Nathan, there still floated before him the image of this worthy man, who, with all the stress which he laid upon dogmas of belief, nevertheless regarded an active love for our fellow-men as the chief sign and proof of true piety. These sentiments appeared

also in the writings of the learned pastor, wherein he insisted that the essential should be separated from the non-essential in matters of religion, and that the sincerity of religious zealots should be tested by the unvarying fruits of the Spirit, which are love, joy, and peace. His own life was a rich yield of these precious fruits; and his youngest son, Charles, thus bears witness to his goodness and consistency: "With almost incomprehensible abnegation of the common enjoyments of life, which are within reach of even the poorest mechanic, he sacrificed himself for the education of his children, endured all privations with cheerfulness, all want with firmness, all weariness with joyful tranquillity, and, notwithstanding his own penury, never sent a poor man from his door without alms."

With all these qualities he gave to his illustrious son the vivacity which belongs to vigorous physical health, and a noble contempt for the luxuries of wealth, in so far as these oppose and hinder self-reliance and spiritual strength. He inspired him also with an austere sense of right, and an aversion, and even hatred, towards that frivolity in moral and religious matters which had then begun to find its way from France to Berlin, and thence into the rest of Germany. From him, too, Lessing inherited a love of accuracy in scientific pursuits, which regards even the smallest fact as important when historical truth is concerned, without, however, exaggerating its significance in a pedantic manner. What the worthy pastor says in the preface to the history of his native city, in reference to certain errors of his predecessors which he had corrected, that "historical truth is like the eye, which cannot bear the least mote of dust," might have been

written, both in substance and form of expression, by his gifted son. And Lessing-like, also, in spirit and imagery are his words, when he adds that "those who by special investigations correct great general works ought to be as little conceited on that account as dwarfs who see farther than the giants on whose shoulders they stand." Indeed, the general style of the various writings of the old theologian appears (from the specimens quoted by Danzel) to have been greatly superior to the prevailing type in the first half of the last century. Especially is he free from all hybridism of language (*Sprachmengerei*) — a fact which is the more to his credit on account of his knowledge, not only of the ancient tongues, but also of the two most important living languages of Europe.

Of Lessing's brothers and sisters, only Justina and the second son, Theophilus, can have been the playmates of his youth, since the others were much younger. This sister was two years older than himself. She remained at home unmarried, and died in 1803, at the age of seventy-six. A letter from Gotthold to her, written when he was only fourteen years of age (the earliest document of his which we possess), presents some of her characteristics in so striking a manner that it deserves quotation here. It is a New Year's letter which he sends from the grammar-school at Meissen to remind her that she had not once written to him during the whole of his six months' absence from home. "I have indeed written to you," he says, "but you have not replied. I must, therefore, conclude that you either cannot or will not write. I was well nigh disposed to assert the first, yet I will also believe the other —

you will not write. In either case you are culpable. To be sure, I cannot understand how this can be : a rational being, able to converse rationally, and yet unable to compose a letter ! Write as you speak, and you will write well. Nevertheless, if the above supposition were true, — that you can converse sensibly, but cannot write, — so much the greater shame to you that you have not learned. You have, to be sure, left your teacher and your school very prematurely, and already, in your twelfth year, you regarded it as a disgrace to be compelled to study any longer ; but which is the greater disgrace, — to be acquiring knowledge in one's twelfth year, or not to be able to write a letter in one's eighteenth or nineteenth year ? Do write, and let me know that my opinion of you is incorrect. Meanwhile I must remember that this is the New Year, when every one wishes some good to his fellows. But what shall I wish for you ? It must be something especial : I wish that all your mammon might be stolen from you ! Perhaps the loss would benefit you more than would a New Year's present of several hundred ducats. Farewell. I am thy faithful brother, G. E. Lessing."

Notwithstanding the touch of pedantry in this letter of the youthful moralist, the vast intellectual superiority of the brother is as unmistakable as are the suggested characteristics of the sister, whose petty aims and narrow views at this early period correspond perfectly to what we shall have to tell of her in Lessing's after life. Yet, although he could have no sympathy with her in mind and heart, he showed her great brotherly kindness through his whole life, notwithstanding that in later years he was often obliged to resist her ceaseless, and

for the most part harshly and violently expressed, demands upon his purse. His brother Theophilus also, of whom we know nothing except that he became a ready Latin poet, differed greatly from him in mental endowments and proclivities. He was a narrow-minded person and a philological pedant ; and Gotthold, when his father, who was much dissatisfied with the eldest son, wrote to him that he was well pleased with Theophilus at Meissen, might well give him the significant answer, "*If I were Theophilus*, you would also be pleased with me." Meanwhile, however little sympathy Lessing's type of mind afterwards found at home, and however great the difference between his brothers and sisters and himself, still their united experience was such as to develop in him the true family spirit, whose roots, grounded in active love, struck deep into the well-cultivated soil, and kept the man who was so early driven out into the world, and so much driven about in it, in constant and intimate union with his nearest kin, in spite of the great gulf which separated them intellectually.

## CHAPTER II.

## THE SCHOOL.

LESSING was not yet thirteen years old, when, in 1741, he left his father's house, in order to exchange the school of his native city for the celebrated grammar-school (Fürstenschule) of Meissen. This early departure from home was caused by a difference which arose between his father and his teacher, Heinitz, rector of the Kamenz public school, who, in consequence, resigned his position and left the town. Heinitz was a brilliant young scholar of enlightened views, who was deeply interested, not only in science, but also in polite literature. He was associated with what was the young Germany of that time, the Leipsic school, the leader of which, Gottsched, patronized enthusiastically the German stage; and in 1740, Heinitz put forth a programme in which he defended the theme, that "The Stage is a School of Eloquence." This was reason enough for Lessing's father and the other representatives of old Germany and Orthodoxy to shake their heads in condemnation. Moreover, the pious gentlemen were not content with head-shaking; and we learn that the magistracy, at the head of which was a relative of Lessing, as burgomaster, sent reproofs and warnings to the young rector, whilst the pastor primarius assailed, even from the pulpit, the opinions of this



free-thinking instructor of youth. The affair ended with a little newspaper scandal, which threw all Kamenz into commotion, and affected, in its consequences, the whole course of Lessing's life.

An imprudent and too zealous friend of the assailed rector, Christlieb Mylius, a Leipsic student of twenty-one years of age, had celebrated the departure of the former from Kamenz in a poem, which congratulated him on his removal from that borough of insipidity and barbarism, and, at the same time, indulged in all kinds of insinuations against the burgomaster and the pastor primarius. The magistracy did not, of course, take this in good part. The young satirist, while on a visit, during vacation, to Kamenz, was imprisoned; and although he appealed to the privileges of poetic license, and tried to disclaim the evident meaning of his lines, he was forced to apologize, and pay a fine.\*

This Mylius, who was called "The Free-thinker," after the title of a journal published by him, will meet us again in Lessing's university years at Leipsic. It is not surprising that the pious pastor primarius endeavored as soon as possible to remove his son from a school whose rector, in his destructive proclivities, had dared, in a public programme, to praise the stage as a school of eloquence. But to us it is a significant fact, that the programme was read by this boy of twelve years, who afterwards became the founder of the German drama, and that it bore its first fruits in him, even while he was a pupil in the Meissen grammar-school. The father had already, at Easter, taken away his son from the

\* The details of this affair, as well as the poem, can be found in Danzel, *Life of Lessing*, Vol. I. 17-19.

Kamenz school, and brought him to a relation, Pastor Linder, of Putzkau, who had offered to prepare him for admittance to the grammar-school of Meissen, which he himself had formerly attended. He succeeded in obtaining for his young relative a scholarship, which secured to him a free maintenance, except in clothing; and the youth entered the institution on the 21st of June, 1741, a day whose return, one hundred years after, was destined to be observed there as a festival.

The school of St. Afra, in Meissen, was one of the three celebrated Saxon grammar-schools which the Elector, Maurice, of Saxony, had established out of the property of abolished cloisters. These institutes, in which a majority of the pupils were educated and supported gratuitously, with the exception of a moderate charge for board, formed then, as now, the seat of thorough erudition, based principally upon the ancient classical languages, by which the founder intended to furnish from these cadet schools capable defenders of the Reformation and the evangelical faith. A certain cloister-like arrangement, a carefully organized system of superintendence, and a consequently severe discipline, were thereby necessarily promoted. But severe discipline only fosters independence in men who are born with dispositions for liberty, and it was no harm to the freest of the free, that his youth was passed in the monastically narrow limits of the Meissen Afraneum.

Indeed, even this narrowness was a great extension of his former mental horizon. His transfer to this institution, where more than a hundred youths of all classes (without distinction of position or property) enjoyed the same instructions, and partook of the same accommoda-

tions, even to food and dress, removed him from all the petty restrictions of his own social and domestic circumstances, relieved him from the presence of poverty which he had begun to feel in his father's house, and awakened in him that republican bias towards equality which penetrated his whole life.

The instruction given in this school was particular and clear; and Lessing afterwards affirmed that if, as he modestly expresses himself, "any thoroughness and accuracy of scholarship has become his portion," he owed it to the discipline acquired at this time. To be sure the knowledge aimed at in the royal cloister-school belonged exclusively to the service of religion and theology. The purpose was to educate theologians and divines, and even the ancient languages were studied only for their use in the right interpretation of the Holy Scriptures.

The old pastor primarius of Kamenz had brought his son to this school, in order to make of him a future servant of the Word — a preacher, or, at least, a learned theological professor; and it does not appear that the son had, during the first years of his course, any other views concerning his destiny. Amongst the studies taught, Latin stood first, and to it were devoted not less than fifteen hours of each week. Latin composition and Latin versification were the chief goals for the ambition and industry of the pupils. Greek was limited to four hours a week. Meanwhile, the other branches of instruction, which are now taught in gymnasia, were by no means neglected. Of the modern languages, French, and of the sciences, geography and history, mathematics and astronomy, and, in the higher classes, logic and ethics, were taught; and even instruction in Italian,

music, and drawing was given at extra hours. Yet, probably, there was not much done with these latter; for, on the one hand, a jealous watch was kept that the ancient languages should not suffer loss by such *Allo-*  
*tria*; and on the other hand, little time was left for their cultivation, because public worship, prayer meeting, and  
Bible class claimed *twenty-five hours of the week*. Instruction in the German language and literature, as well as German composition, were, on principle, excluded from the schedule of study, or only pursued collaterally, and, properly speaking, were rather tolerated than promoted.

But these grammar-schools possessed (and still possess to some extent) one inestimable advantage over our modern gymnasia, and to it they owed the greatest part of their efficiency and success. This advantage consisted in the wider play given to individual effort and private diligence, which in our gymnasia, to the serious detriment of both teachers and taught, have been rendered almost impossible through the great number and extent of public exercises, and the labor necessary to prepare for them. The lectures of the grammar-schools served only "to show where and how intellectual nutriment must be sought and assimilated." This free scope for independent study must have been of special advantage to a nature like Lessing's; and he used his liberty in such a manner that long afterwards, in the maturity of his genius and experience, he pronounced those years of study in the routine of a cloister-school the only years in which he had  
lived happily. Besides, there was not wanting here the quiet in which, according to Goethe, talent is developed. As Charles Lessing observes in the description of his brother's sojourn in this school, "One knew and heard

nothing of the diversions and hinderances which are so injurious to youth, especially in large cities. The students did not care for the frivolities of the great world without, or the little world in their immediate vicinity; they conversed more of Greece and Latium than of Saxony; spoke more Latin than French; prayed much, but indulged little in pious cant; and whoever thought more of study than of prayer, studied without praying." The development of individual character, too, was more complete and rapid in the community of a large school than it could be in the isolation of domestic surroundings. As regards Lessing, two peculiarities were strongly prominent at this time. A censorial criticism of his character by an inspector of noble birth, which is still preserved, is as follows: "A good boy, but somewhat cynical." It indicates strikingly Lessing's talent for keen observation, and his proclivity to a witty exposure of the weaknesses and errors of others; while another story, communicated by his brother, shows his frankness and love of truth, accompanied by a forwardness which perhaps could not be avoided by a young man in his position towards the scholars of that time.

Lessing was already one of the senior pupils, and in his capacity as superintendent of a part of his juniors, was present at the Saturday evening conference of teachers. On one occasion the rector put the question to the assembly, why the pupils, during the week in which the associate rector Höre performed the duty of chief warden, came so late to prayers.

Every one was silent except Lessing, who whispered to a companion standing near him, "I know." The rector, who had heard the words, commanded him to

speaking out what he knew. At first he was unwilling; but at length, after being repeatedly urged, he burst out, "The associate rector does not come promptly at the stroke of the bell, and so each student thinks that prayers will not commence immediately." The rector, who, in putting his question, had calculated somewhat on Lessing's instinctive love of truth to enable him to give his colleague a lesson, saw his purpose reached; for Höre, who could not deny the fact, only broke out in the astonished exclamation — "Admirable Lessing!" After that Lessing retained this name amongst his fellow-pupils, and the associate rector held him in spiteful remembrance; for, at a later period, in 1751, when Lessing was living in Berlin, his father communicated to him a letter, in which the same associate rector could not suppress the grudge against his former pupil; and when Lessing's second brother entered the same institution, the still irritated schoolmaster received him with these words: "Be industrious, but not so impertinent (literally, *nose-wise*) as your brother."

But more important than these slight traits (which, however, ought not to be omitted in a biography) is the inner development which manifested itself, even at this stage of Lessing's career, in the free action of a spirit born for independence. The more mature he became, the farther he felt himself removed from the spirit which directed the instruction of the grammar-school, particularly in the study of antiquities. The youth of sixteen was already freeing himself from every subordination of learning to exterior systems, inasmuch as he elevated the study of antiquity to a purpose in itself, instead of regarding it as a means and preparation to a

theological end. He was a philologist ; not in the sense of his teachers, who esteemed Latin composition the chief purpose of classical studies, and who, in this respect, were not so well satisfied with him as with the majority of his fellow-pupils, but in a far higher sense, which regards ancient writings as an important revelation of human character and progress. Thus he laid the foundation for that magnificent conception of antiquity, which gave to all his later works in this department, such broad views and purposes pertaining to humanity and civilization.

In this respect we find in the scholar of the Meissen grammar-school a deep consciousness of his life-mission, and the entire form of his subsequent activity is prefigured in the germ of his early thought.

Already, at school, where his love for one of his teachers inspired him with a warmer interest in mathematics, he translated Euclid, and worked at a history of mathematics among the ancients. He read by himself a number of authors whose works were not used in the public recitations ; but his proper world, as he afterwards said, was Theophrastus, Plautus, and Terence, writers whose theme is Man and Life ; and these books the youth, who was drawn to the study of his kind even in his seclusion from the world, read with avidity. And they had a fructifying influence upon his mind, not only in determining the direction of his first creative activity, but also because he applied the insight into human nature derived from such reading, immediately to himself, and to his relations with others ; so that, as he wrote in his twentieth year to his mother, he learned self-knowledge by reading "comedies." For this reason, Hagedorn,

who had studied Horace in the same spirit, was regarded by him as the first German lyrical poet of his time, as he acknowledges in a letter to his father written in 1749.

The mathematical teacher of this school, John Albert Klemm, exerted a most important influence over Lessing in these matters. This man was a bad pedagogue, since he lacked the dignity of manner necessary to inspire his pupils with respect ; but he was a man of thorough and many-sided culture, whose mental horizon extended far beyond the limits of the school, and the narrow pedantic philology then in favor. Respected as a mathematician by the then masters of his science, he was also unwearied in devoting his time and his rich acquirements in almost all departments of knowledge to those scholars who felt disposed to seek his aid. Lessing was one of those who attached themselves most closely to this teacher, so wise and liberal, and yet so lightly esteemed by the school authorities ; and he made rapid improvement through frequent interviews with his kind friend, who, surrounded by a few earnest companions, often sat in his study till after midnight, helping them to clear up their views of science and literature, and to perceive the relation of means and ends in study. When the student of twenty afterwards wrote to his father from Leipsic that he had "already at Meissen understood how one must learn much there which one cannot use in the world," we can attribute the possession of such ideas to the influence of the man, in intercourse with whom he came to see, as his brother Charles says, "how little he really knew, and how much he had yet to learn." By him he was taught that the study of languages is to be regarded only as means to an end, and that a scholar without a knowledge



of mathematics, philosophy, and natural sciences possesses only an imperfect culture — opinions which were arrant heresies in a school whose chief purpose was to educate men to become correct Latin composers and Latin poets, and in which, as Lessing afterwards sarcastically remarked in reference to the principal philological teacher, the formerly-mentioned associate rector Höre, the endeavor was less “to make of the pupils rational men than competent collegians; that is, persons who blindly believe their teachers, without inquiring whether they are not pedants.”

Besides his knowledge of the ancient languages, Klemm was also well versed in English, French, and Italian; and, what was of still more importance, Lessing was, through him, made acquainted with German literature. He became familiar with the writings of Hagedorn and Gleim, and the Halle poets; and the perusal of Haller incited him to one of his own earliest poetical efforts, a poem “On the Plurality of Worlds,” which was intended to consist of several cantos, and the material for which was, doubtless, furnished him by his favorite teacher. Six years afterwards, Lessing expressed himself more fully concerning this attempt, in a letter contained in his miscellaneous writings, in which he communicates also a few fragments of this philosophical and didactic poem.

“I rhymed my thoughts,” he says, “after a rather mathematical method; here and there a comparison, here and there a little episode; that was all of the poetical that I brought into it.” But he abandoned the attempt when, soon after it was commenced, the “Conversations” of Fontenelle on the same subject came into

his hands ; and the ingenious production of the French author opened his eyes to the feebleness of his own effort. Nevertheless, fifteen years later he is compelled to confess that much of it seems to him quite tolerably expressed ; and a glance at the quoted fragments even now confirms this praise in the fullest degree. The turn with which the introduction concludes, is not bad for a poet only seventeen years of age. After comparing with the enterprise of Columbus, his own literary venture, in which "it is easier to meet disaster than at sea," he says, that although the result should be failure, "they make glorious shipwreck who are lost in seeking worlds." \*

And the observations on the "Selfishness of Priestcraft," which, even in the earliest times, banished knowledge, like worship, to "dark temples," as well as the allusion to French frivolity, which so often "boasts arrogantly of knowledge stolen at birth from a neighbor," are very characteristic of Lessing, who did not lose sight of these two themes all his life long.

But more important than this effort is the first dramatic attempt of the ambitious boy, to which, in the solitude of the Meissen cloister-school he was incited by the study of the Roman dramatists, and the Grecian delineator of character, Theophrastus.

This play is "The Young Scholar;" a comedy, which, however, was not completed till two years afterwards, and then with considerable modification. For us

\* The stanza in the original is as follows :—

"Beherzter als Columb tret ich den Lustweg an,  
Wo leichter als zur See die Kühnheit scheitern kann.  
Mag doch die Sinnlichkeit des frommen Frevels fluchen!  
Genug: die scheitern schon, die scheiternd Welten suchen."

this piece possesses no claim to poetical worth, and, like all the early essays of Lessing in the drama, has only a subordinate interest, as a part of his literary history. But it is valuable as a landmark of his culture and development, because it indicates an act of self-emancipation in the youth, and because it confirms the truth of what he declares in a letter to his mother concerning the influence of the perusal of the ancient dramatists on his knowledge of himself. He says of these first writings, which were composed at a period when he "knew men only from books," "I believe that the choice of the subject was the principal reason why I did not altogether fail in the treatment of it. A young scholar was the only species of fool which, at that time, it was not possible for me to be unacquainted with. Grown up amongst such vermin, was it strange that I directed my first weapons against them?" And he himself belonged to these fools, to the observation and study of whom his perusal of the ancient dramatists led him. In the letter to his mother, already mentioned, he writes, "I learned to know myself, and from that time I have certainly laughed at no one else more heartily." The emancipator of his nation from the tyranny of pedantry perceived, as a youth, that he himself was in a fair way to become a thorough pedant. That he was correct in his estimate of himself, we have abundant evidence in the already quoted letter to his sister, and in a sermon-like epistle of the student of fourteen to his father, wherein, in genuine Wagner style, he attempts to prove to the old gentleman, who was wont to mourn over the degeneracy of the times, that "one year is, in reality, exactly like another." So much the more wonderful is it that the youth of

seventeen years turns against his own folly, and, as Danzel has convincingly shown in detail, directs the first tilt of his comic muse against his own vain self-exaltation, and in his "Young Scholar" derides even that pedantic letter to his father. We shall return to this composition in the next chapter, when we come to speak connectedly of Lessing's youthful dramas. It is enough to present in this place the ethical side, the moral importance of the effort, in illustration of the development of the youth, who, filled with such a spirit, and having attained such freedom of perception as regards himself, must, necessarily, have outgrown the school earlier than the rest. Even his teacher seems to have had a presentiment of the feelings of his pupil.

The rector Grabener, of whom the old pastor inquired at this time by letter concerning his son, gave the honest answer, "He is a horse that must have double fodder. The lessons which are hard for others are nothing for him. We cannot use him much longer."

Already, at the beginning of 1746, young Lessing had reached the first class, in which, by the regulations of the school, he had yet a year and three months to remain. But as, during his whole life, he could never prevail upon himself to continue in any situation of which he believed he had exhausted the usefulness, so now he endeavored to induce his father to procure for him an exceptional permission to leave the school, by petitioning the Dresden Upper Consistory. This request was at first refused; and the disappointment was still greater to Lessing, since the peace and quiet of his life at Meissen had been disturbed by the breaking in of the fearful incidents of war.

On the 15th of December, 1745, the students saw, from the height on which the Meissen cloister-school stands, the sky ruddy with the reflection of burning villages, and heard the artillery-thunder of the battle of Kesselsdorf, in which old Dessau was annihilating the allied Saxons and Austrians. Even in Meissen, the Prussian drums rattled, and the streets swarmed with Prussian cavalry and infantry; for the warlike young King of Prussia himself tarried here, in painful uncertainty as to the issue of the battle, till late in the evening, when an officer was despatched by his general to bear the news of the victory.\*

It was, indeed, a peculiar turn of fate that made the first piece of active life which came before the youth of seventeen years, a specimen of war. The impressions then received were afterwards depicted in Minna von Barnhelm; whilst at the time, he was obliged, in accordance with the desire of his father, to celebrate the valor of the defeated Saxons in a poetical missive to Lieutenant-Colonel Von Carlowitz, his patron, through whom he had received his free place in the Meissen school.

How unpleasant this task must have been to him is evident from a letter to his father — the only one which we possess out of the period of his school life. The father had praised the poetic epistle, but yet requested that it should be remodelled.

The son replied, "The praise which you have bestowed upon me, on account of the poetic eulogy of Lieutenant-Colonel Von Carlowitz, will stimulate me to make, *according to your desire*, a shorter, and, if I can, a better one; *although I have little pleasure in taking*

\* Varnhagen, Biograph. Denkmale, II. 359.

*this material again in hand.* Indeed, I must freely confess to you, that, when I consider the time already spent, and yet to be spent with it, I cannot but reproach myself for such useless dissipation. My best consolation is, that the work is done by your command." The rest of the letter also deserves mention, in which the son, already superior to the father, and yet preserving the spirit of an obedient child, gives a picture of his circumstances at Meissen, now harassed by the severest trials of war. "You have reason," he says, "to pity poor Meissen, which is now more like a charnel-house than the pleasant city of yore. It is full of stench and filth, and whoever is not obliged to come within its limits, remains as far as possible away. In most of the houses there are still lying from thirty to forty wounded soldiers, whom no one dares to approach very closely, because all dangerous cases are accompanied with putrid fever. It is a merciful providence of God that these dreadful circumstances have come upon the city in the winter, for if it were summer they would, doubtless, occasion a fearful pest. Yet we will hope the best of God. In consideration of the present evils, no place in the city seems more miserable than our school. Once it was full of life; now it appears dead. Once it was rare to see even a healthy soldier within its walls; now we are surrounded by heaps of wounded, from whose proximity we must experience no little inconvenience and danger. The Cœnaculum\* has become like a butcher's shambles, and we are compelled to dine in the small auditorium. The scholars who have gone away

\* The large common dining-hall for the one hundred and twenty pupils of the institute.

for fear of contracting disease, have as little desire to return as the steward has to restore the unoccupied tables. For my own part, it is all the more annoying to be obliged to remain, since you seem disposed to leave me here through the summer, when the circumstances will probably be ten times worse. I believe that the reason which influenced your decision could easily be removed. But I am not disposed to say anything further about a matter in which our opinions are so widely different. I comfort myself, meanwhile, in the belief that you understand my welfare better than I do. And in this assurance I will continue to love and honor you as my father, even though you should persist in your refusal."

We see from the above allusions that the rigid old gentleman went so far in his pedantic tenacity of traditional order, that he at first preferred to expose his son to evident danger rather than to shorten the regular six years' course of school instruction. But at length the venerable Dresden Consistorium became enlightened on the subject. The often requested certificate of honorable dismissal was finally bestowed; and Lessing, after having presented a valedictory essay "*De Mathematicâ Barbarorum*" (On the Mathematics of the Ancients), left the institute on the 30th of June, 1746, to enter the University of Leipsic.

## CHAPTER III.

## THE UNIVERSITY.

AFTER a short sojourn in his father's house, Lessing at the age of seventeen, entered the University of Leipsic, in September, 1746. A stipend from the municipality of Kamenz, and a contribution from the same relative who had prepared him for the grammar-school of Meissen, helped the parents to defray his expenses, which, on account of their increasing family and limited means, remained sufficiently oppressive. His admission as academical citizen took place on the same day on which, twenty years later, another youth, for whom he was destined by his intellectual labors to prepare the way, was matriculated as a Leipsic student, namely, John Wolfgang Goethe, the son of a Frankfort patriot. Both were of the same age, for Goethe had just finished his seventeenth year when he entered the university, and both came there with the same secret purpose — to devote their studies to the acquirement of a liberal culture, contrary to the wishes of their parents, who expected them to pursue the technicalities of an exclusive profession. This culture then seemed attainable only through the knowledge of classical antiquity, then recently revived in Germany; and from that source the intellect of the youthful generation sought to derive its stimulus for independent creation and poetical activity.



But with this similarity in the position of the two youths who were to found entirely new epochs in the moral and intellectual development of their nation, and bring about revolutions in thought which were scarcely imagined at that time, there was, nevertheless, a marked contrast between the mental conditions with which they began their self-appointed task. The thorough and systematical preparation which the pupil of the Meissen grammar-school had enjoyed in one of the most celebrated nurseries of philological studies, and the acquirements in science which he had made under the influence of his Mentor Klemm, outweighed considerably the disconnected preparatory culture which the patrician's son had received at home, through irregular private instruction, and reading of a very desultory kind. Whilst, therefore, both pursued their studies irregularly at the university, the result in each case was widely different. However greatly Lessing may have departed from the ordinary course of the majority of the students, his studies at Leipsic were essentially and immediately a continuation of those heretofore pursued; and he increased their depth and extent so as to make a firm basis of genuine knowledge; while with Goethe the time spent at the university is to be regarded as almost wholly lost in this respect. Still greater was the contrast between them in their social relations. The young aristocrat of Frankfort, whose recommendations opened to him the best houses in Leipsic, obtained different views and experiences from those of the poor preacher's son of Kamenitz, to whom, as he emerged from his cloister solitude of five years, the world and life were almost as unknown as the interior of the moon. Goethe had become, in some

degree, morbidly *blasé* by premature worldly experiences of a most suspicious kind, and, having passed through all sorts of inner and outer discords, had developed partly sentimental and partly pietistic views of life, which gave their own coloring to his career in Leipsic. Lessing, on the contrary, entered into the world, hitherto wholly foreign to him, and into the life which he had scarcely anticipated from books, with the unvitiated freshness of a noble nature, conscious of its power and destiny, and ready to appropriate, with joyful zeal, the new impressions and experiences opening before it. Neither at home nor at school had he, as yet, lived in conflict with his moral instincts, and his character, therefore, possessed no trace of weak sentimentality.

The simplicity of his home-life had developed in him a warm sympathy with the common interests of his kind, and his father's example had awakened a desire for theological learning, but no tendency toward hypercritical pietism.

At school, where he had laid the foundation of extensive philological culture, he had also learned the value of liberal thought and close self-examination, and his long seclusion from active life had only intensified his strong desire to enlarge and correct the knowledge acquired from books, by the lessons of actual experience. Thus, sound in mind and body, a fair, unwritten tablet, he went zealously to work to conquer the facts and problems of his expanding existence, and to carry on the process of self-emancipation which he had early discovered to be the most necessary element in the progress of humanity.

When Lessing, after five years' absence, revisited

home, his father found that his mind was already ripened to a degree of independence which made it almost impossible to dictate to him the course which he should pursue at the university. If, however, his parents still cherished the hope that their son would, in obedience to their wishes, devote himself to theology, the University of Leipsic was certainly not at all adapted to the furtherance of such a hope.

Among the theologians connected with the institution at that time, there was not one of sufficient power to win the youth to that department, and to divert his attention from those studies which even at school had made a predominant claim upon his thoughts ; while his favorite branches had here two representatives, who, even now, stand as pioneers in the history of the development of philology and antiquities. These men were John Augustus Ernesti and John Frederic Christ, the founders of the reform of philological studies in the middle of the eighteenth century. They were the teachers and inciters of Lessing, as, one year after his departure, they were also of Heyne, who continued their work at Göttingen, and, in connection with Lessing himself and Winckelmann, raised the interest in philology and the literature and art of the ancients to such a height that the aspiring spirits among the German youth turned with enthusiasm to this source of culture, now, as it were, discovered for the second time ; and even Goethe regarded it as the goal of his desires to become Heyne's pupil, and one day, if possible, his successor in his science.

Both Ernesti and Christ were in their prime of life and mental power when Lessing entered the university ; and their influence over him was proportionately great.

Ernesti had, a short time before, laid down in a handbook the basis of an independent and symmetrical culture, which should not be connected with any of the three professions of that day; and his plan embraced all those pursuits which had attracted Lessing as a school-boy. The young student must have been delighted also with his master's conception of philological studies; for he defined and taught them as a means of knowing the results which the best endowed nations of antiquity had attained in philosophy, literature, social morals, government, art, and science. At the same time, these studies were recommended not less as a means of promoting æsthetic culture and individual creativeness. It was from this comprehensive view that Ernesti proceeded, when he, for the first time, and to the horror of all those philological pedants who regarded the writing and speaking of good Latin as the chief end to be obtained, laid down the proposition that a living penetration into the meaning and spirit of the literature of the ancients is of incomparably greater importance than the acquirement of the purest Latin style. It was Ernesti who helped to develop in Lessing an appreciation of the beauties of the ancient poets, and thus vindicated to him the formal side of philology.

But the second of these two men became of still greater importance to the young student, because he excited in him an earnestness from whence were developed the richest fruits of Lessing's philological activity, which, like his *Laokoön*, are of ever-new value to the collective culture of his nation. Whilst, therefore, with Ernesti the form remained predominant, and the real knowledge of antiquity had interest for him only as it

served to interpret the ancient authors and poets, in Christ we have the forerunner of Winckelmann, the founder of the archæology of art; and Lessing found in him the only man in Leipsic whose culture lay in the same direction with his own proclivities.

Christ was indeed the only scholar in Germany who regarded, and taught others to regard, the monuments of ancient art with the eye of the archæological investigator; and he was also the first who undertook to discuss such subjects in the German language. He united with profound knowledge and extensive historical reading, the good breeding of a man of the world, which he had acquired by intercourse with distinguished persons and familiarity with the customs of many countries.

He had travelled through Germany and the Netherlands, France, and a portion of Italy, and, besides his study of the works of the ancients, had made a still greater acquaintance with the productions of modern art. He carried on his antiquarian researches in constant connection with a close observation of the habits and necessities of later times, and knew how to form a comparative estimate of the imaging and poetic arts of the different ages. He was himself a skilful draughtsman and engraver, and even possessed a collection of copperplate engravings, and other works of art. Besides, he was a man of liberal ideas and fine historical insight, who defended with acuteness the republicanism of Macchiavelli and his "*Principe*" in an essay full of vigorous thought, and who, in his endeavor to effect a union between abstract science and actual life, adopted consciously and voluntarily the theories of Thomasius. Such a mind could be as little pleased as was the great

Fredetic with the existing state of German literature, and he entertained a thorough contempt for the pedantic arrogance of most of its supporters. But he loved and admired the old German language and literature, from which Luther had derived his pithy and powerful style, and would not allow the noble church hymns to be diluted by the followers of Gottsched.

If to these characteristics we add that Christ was a man of striking power of expression and keen polemic skill, as much inclined to make bold assertions and paradoxes as he was competent to defend them by his extraordinary erudition, and that, at the time when Lessing became his student, he had just given such a proof of these qualities as was then agitating the whole philological world, in his essay on the fables of Phædrus (which he attempted to represent as a bungling forgery of the fifteenth century), we can easily imagine how great influence such a man must have exerted over the young Lessing, who met his teacher in all these directions with kindred tendencies and talents. Indeed, Lessing's first philological writings on Horace and Plautus treated of those very authors upon whom he had heard Christ lecture; and it is a remarkable coincidence that his last composition, interrupted by his death, should have ended with the name of this teacher.

As the philological side of the knowledge which Lessing brought with him to the university was promoted by Ernesti and Christ, so the impulses which he had received from his instructor Klemm at Meissen were continued through the personal intimacy which he formed with another Leipsic professor, the at that time still youthful mathematician and philosopher, Abraham Gott-

helf Kæstner. Kæstner, only ten years older than Lessing, was a man of many-sided culture, possessed of some knowledge of languages, and considerable poetical taste, a wit, a genial epigrammatist, and, by reason of these varied endowments and acquirements, a most delightful and suggestive companion. His philosophical disputations, which Lessing regularly attended, united the best intellects among the youth then studying at Leipsic into an association which continued its intercourse beyond the lecture-hours. Most of the members of this circle, as Mylius, Zachariæ, J. A. Schlegel, and others, had already appeared as authors, and their example and encouragement stimulated Lessing, who had also brought with him from the grammar-school a few manuscripts. But the most powerful influence was produced upon him by Leipsic itself, through the new life which here surrounded him on all sides. He found himself suddenly transferred from the almost monastic seclusion of the Meissen school to a city where, as he expressed himself in the famous confessional letter to his mother, "the whole world could be seen in miniature." This Leipsic of 1746 was a small Paris, which imparted a distinctive culture to its inhabitants. Its situation as the centre of the German book-trade, whereby all the most recent publications were first and most easily made accessible to the literati residing there; its importance as a great commercial city, whose fairs were then of much greater account in general traffic than they are at present; finally, the mingling of aristocratic distinction and cosmopolitan freedom with a certain broad comfortableness of burgher respectability and material welfare which characterized its society, — all this was united with the

splendor of a university which at that time was the most celebrated in Germany, and which maintained its pre-eminence especially because the newly revived humanities possessed in it their most distinguished representatives. Here also Gellert had just placed himself at the head of a new school of poets, and Gottsched himself, sustained by numerous adherents throughout the nation, and by the dominant influence of Leipsic journalism, had formed a centre for all those literary and æsthetical interests which had then begun to agitate the thinking world, particularly in Germany.

The first impression which the young Freshman received almost overpowered him. He acknowledges that for a few months he was, as it were, stunned by it. "I lived for a while," he writes, "more solitary than I had ever done at Meissen." It was some time before he ventured away from his books, and among men. And the first subject to which his eyes were opened was *himself*. In the grammar school, where all the pupils lived on an equality, he had known no distinctions of any kind. Here, on the contrary, he saw how the worldly adroitness of young and wealthy aristocrats gave them an advantage in society which he himself was not willing to forego. He compared himself with others, and perceived that in mind and manners he was a pedant, who, in order to appreciate the beneficial effects of this new element, must first learn to swim in it. "I realized," he says, "that books might make me learned, *but would never make me a man*." The youth of twenty, who, two years afterwards, wrote this significant confession to his mother, in the vain hope that she could appreciate his sentiments, tells us, further, what he did in order to supply the recog-



nized defect, and make himself a man. We quote the passage, because, in the absence of all other letters concerning Lessing's university life, this one contains the only authentic testimony relative to that period. He continues : "I left my study, and ventured out amongst my fellows. Great Heavens ! what a contrast between myself and them did I discover ! A boorish bashfulness of manner, an ungainly clownishness of body, an utter ignorance of social customs, — these were the fine qualities which distinguished me. I read contempt in the demeanor and looks of my companions, and I felt a shame that I had never felt before. The consequence was, that I resolved, at whatever cost, to improve myself with regard to my address and deportment. You yourself know how I began. I learned dancing, fencing, and riding. Since I am willing, in this letter, to confess my faults, I can also say what is good of myself : I made such progress in these exercises that even those who at first had wished to deny me all dexterity were compelled to admire me. This successful beginning encouraged me exceedingly. My body had become somewhat more graceful, and I sought society in order to learn life." "To learn life" then was the aim of the youth, who had hitherto studied it only in books. And as he had acquired knowledge of this kind when at school from the dramas of the ancients, so here in Leipsic he found himself in the presence of the living stage, and that the best of which Germany could then boast. It happened very fortunately that the last gleam of the activity of that wonderful woman to whom Germany owes the renovation of its theatre, occurred during the two years which Lessing spent at Leipsic.

Frederica Neuber had, a few years before, established a company, and made the last attempt to gain a firm footing in that city. The attempt failed; but its author received the compensating glory of having her name associated permanently with the most important period in the development of her art. For it was her privilege to introduce to theatrical life the youth who was destined to give a distinctive national character to German literature and the German stage.\*

In our day, when early familiarity with the theatre is apt to lessen enthusiasm in this greatest of all artistic pleasures, one can with difficulty form a conception of the impression which the first view of a scenic representation must have made upon the youth of eighteen, whose world had hitherto been found in Terence and Plautus.

This impression determined the direction of Lessing's whole after life. With his friend Weisse, who shared his eagerness, he devoted his last penny to gain admittance to the theatre; and both "would have eaten dry-bread rather than lose the play." Together they translated for the Leipsic stage a few French pieces from Marivaux and Reignard, merely for the sake of procuring free tickets. He succeeded finally in obtaining a free entrance to the theatre through the mediation of his friend Mylius, who had already written several pieces for Madame Neuber's stage. Here Lessing learned, as he afterwards expressed himself, not only "a hundred important trifles which a dramatic poet *must* know, and by mere reading never *can* learn," but he also very soon became convinced that he himself possessed the ability to do as well as the poets whose pieces he saw repre-

\* Devrient, Geschichte der deutschen Schauspielkunst, Th. II. S. 57.

sented with so much applause. He also made the acquaintance of Madame Neuber; and that woman, already over fifty years old, was still, in spite of her advanced age, an actress of whom Lessing might well say in his "Dramaturgy" that Germany had not since produced her equal. She was truly, as Lessing declares, "a woman of manly views, and possessing a perfect knowledge of her art;" and that she had a quick and keen perception of dramatic talent is evident from her conduct towards him. One day he had expressed himself very unfavorably, in the circle of his friends, concerning an original production of Gottsched's school, which had been recently represented and favorably received. His companions remarked to him, "It is easier to find fault with the piece than to write a better." Lessing needed nothing more to stimulate him. He immediately resumed his plan for the comedy of "The Young Scholar," and set himself to work to elaborate it for the stage. An accidental circumstance favored him.

A student of Leipsic had presumed to send a treatise to the Berlin Academy of Sciences, in order to compete for an offered prize. In his self-conceit he not only communicated the fact to his friends, but also expressed a firm assurance of the success of the undertaking even at the very time when the crushing intelligence arrived that his treatise had been pronounced the most worthless of the whole collection. Lessing used this event for the catastrophe of his piece, which, in its new form, he showed to his patron, Kästner, and, with his encouragement, laid it before Madame Neuber for her judgment. "But instead of giving an opinion," says Lessing, "she did me an honor which she was not wont to confer upon

a tyro ; she caused the piece to be represented on the stage. If the worth of a comedy is to be measured by the laughter and hand-clapping of the spectators, I had sufficient reason to regard mine as none of the worst." This piece, it is true, was, ten years later, involved in the ruin of Madame Neuber and of her stage, and thereby disappeared from the theatre, where, as Lessing thought, it would otherwise have certainly maintained itself. To the young poet, however, this first success, accompanied by the enthusiastic recognition of a woman whom he justly revered as the first authority in her art, was of great importance.

The theatre became now more and more his world. He confesses that his pleasure in it was at this time so great that everything that came into his head was metamorphosed into a comedy. In proportion as he became conscious of a genius for dramatic poetry, and perceived the advantage, and even the necessity, of a reciprocal action between the drama and the stage, did he attach himself to the theatre and the actors, among whom Koch, Heydrichs, Bruck, as well as the actresses Lorenz and Kleinfelder, were the most prominent. There were times when he even thought of becoming himself an actor. He pursued with zeal the preparatory studies necessary for this profession ; and the tragedian Brückner, who, a few years later, enjoyed his society, was accustomed to say that he had received from Lessing not only the best direction for the comprehension of difficult parts, but even instruction in declamation and gesticulation. How high was Lessing's early estimate of the independent worth of the histrionic art, and how essential to success he considered the proper assigning of each part,

is shown by the circumstance that in Leipsic he gave up an already projected tragedy because the actor Koch, for whom he designed the principal *rôle*, was preparing to go to Vienna.\*

The *heart*, also, of the youth of eighteen, was involved in his passion for the stage; and we shall see hereafter that the amiability of the young actress Lorenz did not fail to make an impression upon him.

Among Lessing's most intimate friends at this period was his countryman, the already frequently mentioned Christlieb Mylius, the most talented and most important of the young Leipsic literati. He was Lessing's senior by seven years, and belonged to Kæstner's circle, into which he introduced his younger friend. Lessing himself has described the career of this "ill-starred German genius" (as he calls him) in the preface with which, six years afterwards, he accompanied the writings of his early companion, who died at London, while on a journey. Born in a village where he soon wished to learn more than he could there acquire, of parents whose pecuniary circumstances did not admit of their giving their son any more learning than would enable him to practise some easy bread-and-butter science, by which he could gain a livelihood, as his father had done before him, he came to a school that was ill adapted to prepare him for such a course — to Leipsic, where one learned scarcely anything so quickly as how to become an author. Here he fell into the hands of Gottsched, a man who by his kindness made many a young wit his champion. Mylius possessed a natural facility for rhyming, and his

\* Devrient, *Geschichte der deutschen Schauspielkunst*, II. 123.

circumstances constrained him to make use of this readiness to a greater degree than was profitable to one who wished to become a poet. He wrote; and the strong necessity of writing much robbed him of the time which he could have devoted with more advantage to his favorite pursuit — the study of the natural sciences. He left the academy in 1748, and went to Berlin, where he used his erudition very much as those do their money who are obliged to consume what they have earned without being able to earn anything in addition. After some time he was recognized as competent for an undertaking of which some were wont to say that one could be brought to it only out of despair. He wished to travel; he did travel; but it was through the favor of other people: and what follows from the favor of others? He died!

To this brief sketch of a life "of which the end was by no means the unhappiest part," Lessing adds that Mylius accomplished more than thousands would have done in the like circumstances. And it was this energy that attracted Lessing to a man who was decried, and not wholly without reason, as a dissolute genius, yet who was in many respects better than his reputation. The Orthodox took offence at the "free-thinker" who dared to explain the Old Testament miracles in accordance with natural laws; fastidious Leipsic showed proper resentment at the cynicism of his external appearance, as he went through the streets in overtrodden shoes, torn stockings, and tattered clothes, as well as at the irregularity of his mode of life, which, through poverty and indiscretion, sunk to such a depth, that sometimes he literally had not where to lay his head, but often, for months together, lodged in the rooms

of younger students, an unwelcome and burdensome guest. Lessing, in whose character patient forbearance with such faults, when they were overbalanced by powerful qualities of another kind, formed a prominent trait, attached himself to the gifted man whose errors did not injure, whilst his many-sided knowledge and the fertility of his mind benefited his friend. He connected himself with the popular journals which Mylius, stimulated by the example of the English, then published for the diffusion of knowledge of the natural sciences, and furnished poetical contributions for the same, in which he applied the Anacreontic verse to a cheerful parody of the scientific subjects treated by Mylius himself. He took part in the dramatic labors of his companion for the Leipsic stage, and also in his studies and interests in natural science, particularly in astronomy; and if he sometimes joined in a wild frolic, he remained, nevertheless, according to Mylius's own testimony, as free from all dissolute coarseness and excess as from that indolence, whose praise the restless and so variously active youth sang in his friend's journal. Still it was natural enough that the intelligence which after a while reached Kamenz concerning his conduct at Leipsic, was not at all calculated to give his parents assurance that their son was leading the life of an orderly scholar. His intercourse with the free-thinker Mylius, so decried at Kamenz; his association with actors and actresses; his publication of poems which — horrible to relate of the son of a worthy clergyman — celebrated wine and beautiful women; all this was intensified by the news that he not only wrote comedies, but was about to appear in one of them on the public stage.

The theatrical profession was, at that time, a real abomination to all pious souls; and, even in the realm of the king of enlightenment, the clergy preached from the pulpit against Peter Hülferding, chief theatre-director of Prussia, who had been privileged by that monarch himself on his accession to the throne. Actors were also denied Christian burial.\* One must consider this state of opinion in order to be just to Lessing's father, who immediately sent a severe letter of remonstrance to his son concerning the neglect of his university studies, and "about the vile society of comedians and free-thinkers;" with the added threat that if these things should be made known to the magistracy of Kamenz he might be deprived of his stipend, which, indeed, was originally designed only "for students of divinity." This letter did not produce the effect which the father had evidently expected. The representation of "The Young Scholar" was to take place in a few days; and the youth, thwarted and insulted in all his interests and inclinations, was tempted, in the first ebullition of his anger, to have his full name printed on the play-bill, and to send it to all the magistrates of Kamenz, as a reply to his father's letter. But his own kindness of heart, even more than the entreaties of his friend Weisse, dissuaded him from this purpose. Lessing was too affectionate a son to do such an injury to the feelings of his parents. But "The Young Scholar" was represented, nevertheless; and the applause which it won would have compensated for the grief which the dissatisfaction of his father caused him, if an accidental circumstance had not come, like a second catastrophe of the comedy, to spoil

\* Preuss, Geschichte Friedrichs des Grossen, III. 367-388.



the whole thing, and move his parents to a decisive step. In spite of her solicitude for the erring son, his mother could not forbear sending him, by a friend who was going to Leipsic, the customary Christmas cake. This holiday gift came just at the right time, with the help of a few bottles of wine, to celebrate the success of his play; and thus through this same friend, who chanced to be a witness of the offence, his mother must learn, to her horror, that her son had consumed the gift of maternal love in company with the notorious free-thinker Mylius and the abhorred comedians.

The inmates of the parsonage at Kamenz had not before imagined that the eldest son had sunk to such a depth!

The mother wept bitterly, and gave up her Gotthold as lost for time and eternity. The father also saw him on the verge of destruction, to save him from which even a pious fraud seemed admissible to the conscientious man. He wrote to the youth only these words: "On the receipt of this letter, take post immediately, and come to us. Your mother is dangerously sick, and longs to speak with you again before her death." Lessing suspected the ruse, but he was too tender-hearted a son not to obey immediately the order which he had received. He set out, as his brother relates, — whose description gives us a delightful family picture in the Flemish style, — just as he was, without the necessary winter clothing. Immediately after the mailing of the letter which summoned him home, a severe frost set in. The tenderness of the mother is aroused. Although she had urged his recall, she hopes that this time he will not obey. For now she thinks of his kindness, his obedience, and the disregard

of himself with which he will start on the journey. She reproaches herself bitterly. Better that he should associate longer with free-thinkers and comedians than to be frozen to death in the stage-coach ! She can scarcely wait for the time when he is to arrive. A thousand times in the day she exclaims, anxiously trying to console herself, "He will not come ! Disobedience is learned in bad company !" But he does come, and enters the house half frozen. They are glad to see again the son thus twice given up for lost, and are only fearful lest the cold which he has endured may prove injurious to him. With still troubled heart, the mother cannot restrain the inquiry, "Why did you come in the cold ?" "Dearest mother, indeed you wished it," he answers innocently, while he shivers in a chill. "I immediately suspected that you were not sick, and am heartily glad of it." In short, the premeditated reproof was changed into a cordial greeting.

Lessing remained several months at home. Of course the theatre gave occasion for lively debates ; but the son's wit and merry humor often mollified the severe earnestness of the father, who, although he by no means approved of the grounds on which his son justified the stage, had yet too much insight to deny altogether the force of his arguments. Besides, the old gentleman saw that the young man's moral character had remained pure and unblemished, and that his love for belles-lettres had not caused him to neglect the sciences. On the contrary, he was greatly advanced in knowledge and culture ; and when he, in order to vindicate himself to his mother, composed a sermon to show her "that he could become a preacher any day," he succeeded in partially reconcil-

ing her to his change of purpose. He would have attained this end more perfectly, however, if he had mounted the pulpit and delivered his sermon in black coat and clerical peruke. But even his mother did not like to insist on such a desecration of the sacred desk in the eyes of a city where every one knew that the student had already "written comedies, and had them performed." She was even obliged to renounce her long-cherished desire to see her son at least a theologian, since he now expressed himself positively against such a vocation.

Yet, in order to satisfy his anxious parents, some calling must be chosen. Lessing decided, therefore, in favor of medicine; but the family, and especially the mother, would not listen to this. Finally, he compromised the matter by promising also to pursue school studies, — that is, philology, — collaterally, in order to help himself along in some way, perhaps as an academical teacher.

The union of medicine and philology was at that time quite common. Indeed, while Lessing was studying at Leipsic, a professorship of philology was conferred upon a doctor of medicine, the afterwards celebrated philologist Reiske, who was, subsequently Lessing's friend. We also know that Lessing really attended medical lectures, and that for half a dozen years later he bore the title of student of medicine. Thus he was accustomed to relate, jokingly, that one of the first lectures which he heard was — on obstetrics. And in fact he became a physician; but it was the physician of the intellectual life of Germany, and the *accoucheur* of the modern literary development of his nation.

This episode of his sojourn at home was an advantage

to the youth in many respects, although he did not then so regard it. That letter of his father withdrew him at the right moment from relations which might easily have gained an ascendancy over him. The applause won by his piece, the thereby increased attractiveness of the theatre, his desire to make trial of himself as an actor, the debts which he had already incurred by his intercourse with actors and actresses, and the danger of being drawn still deeper into the whirlpool of the player's life, which was then recruited very frequently from students, — all these were things concerning which he had time to meditate during the quarter of a year which he spent in the peaceful retirement of his home. The society of his earnest and erudite father, and the studies to which he was incited by the rich collection of books that surrounded him, did not, however, prevent the indulgence of his poetical proclivities. His brother mentions that he wrote many an Anacreontic poem on love and wine, although his father's house certainly did not furnish any incentive to such productions. His older sister, who was one day rummaging in his room, found several sheets of such poems, which, in her pious wrath, she consigned straightway to the flames of the stove. When he missed his papers, his younger brother disclosed the fact to him; and his only revenge consisted in laughingly throwing a handful of snow into the bosom of the fair inquisitress who had instituted this *auto da fé*, in order, as he said, to cool her holy fervor.

At Easter, 1747, Lessing returned to Leipsic. There is no doubt that he resumed his scientific studies under the direction of Christ, Ernesti, and Kæstner; and it is equally certain that he did not, on that account,

renounce his love for polite literature and the drama. He had refused to pledge himself to his parents to give up, once for all, his theatrical tastes, and his long absence had only increased the enjoyment which the theatre now afforded him. He found no reason why he should not resume his old friendships. "He was seen," says his brother, "mornings at the rehearsals, and evenings at the representations ; and he studied the histrionic art with as much zeal as if a professorship of the same were to be established for him at Leipsic." But these delights were not to last long. The introduction of Lessing as a writer for the German stage was the last ray of light in the career of Madame Neuber. Her company declined more and more, until it finally fell into utter dissolution. In the spring of the same year (1748) the best members of her troupe, and among them Lessing's young friend, Mademoiselle Lorenz, accepted a call to Vienna, where preparations were now being made to imitate the reforms of Madame Neuber. Lessing was doubly involved in this catastrophe. To be sure, his former debts had been discharged with his mother's help ; but in his intercourse with the actors he had been beguiled into standing security for some of them, who, on their departure, left him responsible for the payment. Besides, his friend Mylius left Leipsic, about this time, to try his fortune in Berlin, where he had entered into scientific connections.

Thus Lessing found himself in a most undesirable position. Leipsic had grown distasteful to him, and the theatre, which had been so attractive, had gone to destruction. The creditors of those actors for whom he had given security began to press him severely. No aid was to be expected from home ; and there remained

no alternative but to leave Leipsic. His departure was, in fact, a flight; for he kept his resolution a secret even from his nearest friends; so that the first intelligence which they received of his absence was through a letter, in which he announced to his friend Weisse, that he had been taken sick at Wittenberg, on his way to Berlin. This sickness increased the perplexity of his situation. He confesses in a letter to his mother, that his life had become "an intolerable burden."

Fortunately, he found refuge, at Wittenberg, in the house of a student residing there, who was related to him, who had formerly visited him at Leipsic, and in whose company he had thus far journeyed.

He was absolutely forced, at last, to apply to his parents, and received their permission to continue his studies at Wittenberg, where he was enrolled as a student in August, 1748. But his Leipsic creditors pursued him even here. He was more than ever unable to satisfy them now, because his sickness had consumed all his ready money.

In this embarrassment he formed the resolution to make an end of all these perplexities. He could not remain at Wittenberg because of the importunity of his creditors. He therefore determined to abandon his university studies and go to Berlin, where his friend Mylius had meantime obtained a situation as editor of Voss's, or, as it was then called, Rüdiger's newspaper. Lessing decided to apply his stipends to the payment of his debts, and to mark out and make his own way for the future; and with this determination he left Wittenberg in November of the same year, without consulting his parents, and proceeded to Berlin.

Before accompanying him thither, we must take a retrospective view of the results which he achieved while at Leipsic, both in their influence upon his character at that time and upon the formation of his future.

The resolve to suspend his university studies, and to place himself in an independent position, was not caused alone by the young man's outer circumstances. Lessing had indeed long since outgrown ordinary university instruction; he had done so before he entered the university. Those institutions of learning were then, even more than now, arranged with reference to the rank and file of mediocrity; and it was enough that they at least tolerated the exceptions, the genius, the powerful mind, conscious of its ability to become a leader, by furnishing these with facilities for private study. To an active intellect, which already at school had pursued an independent course of study, and learned to comprehend the whole of a subject at a rapid glance, the common method of dribbling in science by semesters must have soon become tedious enough. Indeed, he had never been able to prevail upon himself to attend any lectures regularly, excepting those of Christ and Kästner, although he had diligently studied the subjects which interested him, in books, at home; and it was in reference to this irregularity, that, six years afterwards, he wrote to Michaelis at Göttingen, that he had indeed studied at Leipsic and Wittenberg, but that it embarrassed him greatly to be asked *what* he had studied there.

Besides, the spirit of caste in learning was then in full bloom in Leipsic. The professors did not lecture on those branches of science with which they were most familiar, but on those which were, pecuniarily, the most

profitable. Thus it sometimes happened that a teacher who wished to improve his salary was transferred from one faculty to another, where, at the expense of his auditors, he had first to learn what he was expected to teach others. This corporate pedantry could not but excite the most violent opposition in a spirit so productive and so wholly devoted to liberal knowledge as that of Lessing. "Professoring," as described by Goethe's Mephistopheles, was odious to him through his whole life; and as he himself never became a member of the professorial caste, and never wrote a compendium or a systematic treatise, but always discussed only isolated questions out of the depths of science, so he made it his life-mission to emancipate science from the limits of party, and national culture from the trammels of pedantry; \* while he was aided very much in this striving for universality of culture by the fact that at this time the sciences were more easily surveyed than at a period of which Goethe says, —

"Men change the quiet paths to causeways high,  
Then ask large toll of travellers passing by.  
So will it be with Science: each new plan  
Will claim its own material and man."

The youth who left the university almost in disgrace, in order to begin an unsteady pilgrimage which was to lead him about from place to place for more than twenty years, nevertheless took with him from Leipsic a capital of intellectual discipline and acquirement such as very few persons could have gathered in the short space of scarcely two years. He had laid deeper the knowledge of an-

\* Danzel, I. 57-91.

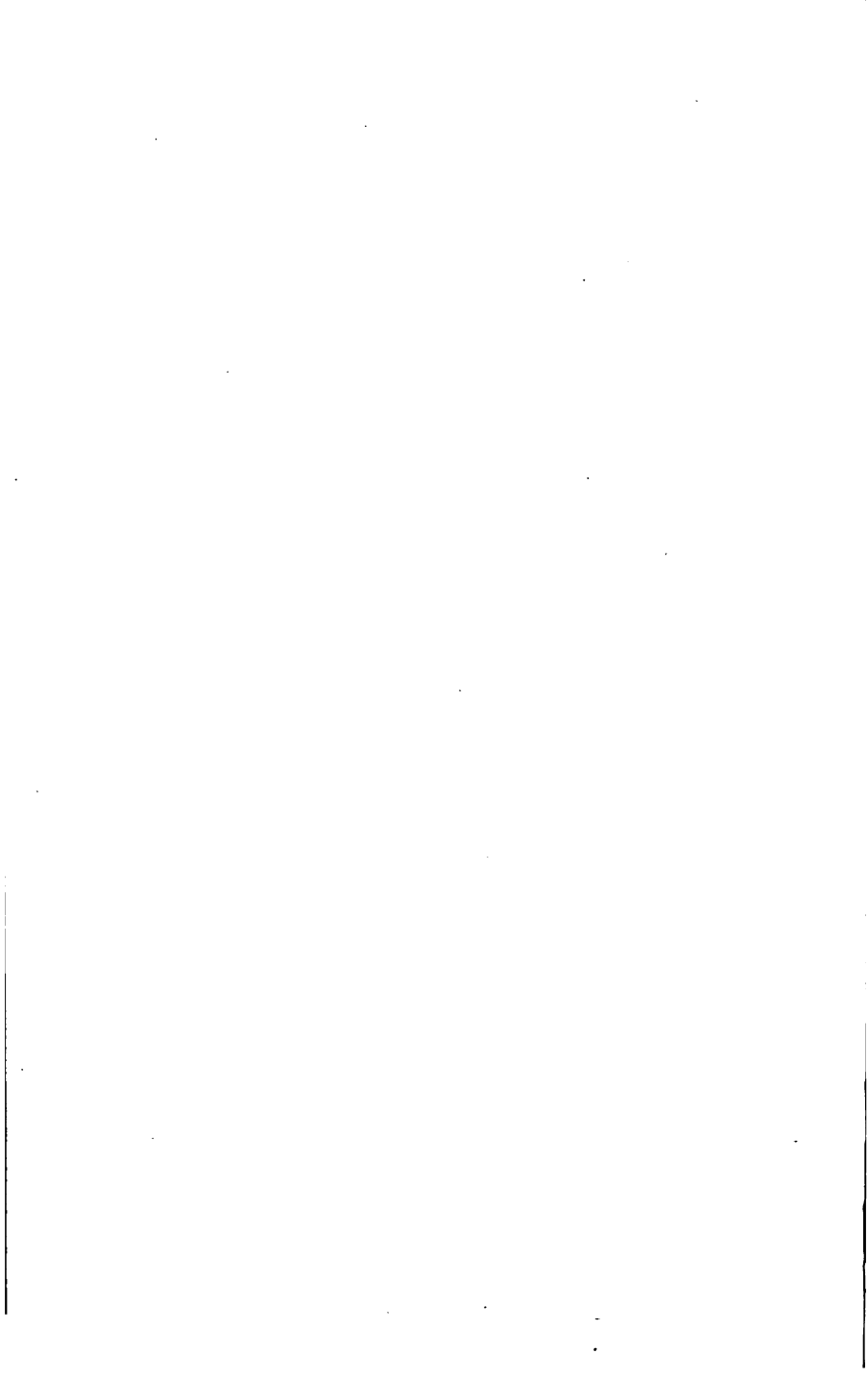


tiquity obtained at the grammar-school, and greatly enlarged his philosophical and scientific culture under Kæstner's direction, and through intercourse with Mylius. He had not only learned to study, — he had also "learned life," and possessed a knowledge of the world and of men, as well as ease and facility in his intercourse with all classes of society. He had come to acknowledge his vocation as a dramatic poet, and to comprehend, through a close connection with the living stage, the importance of a reciprocal action of the one upon the other. A brilliant success had strengthened his ambition, and even the pecuniary advantage which he derived from his first dramatic attempts served to increase his reliance on his own powers.\* And, finally, he had learned what, as he says, was the lesson soonest acquired at Leipsic — to become an author. In that city, after the appearance of Gottsched, a school of authors and journalists had been formed which was in luxuriant bloom when Lessing arrived there. Nearly every one of the more prominent young men of this club was the founder of, or contributor to, some short-lived journal; and we have seen that Lessing formed no exception to this rule. But although in these efforts he limited himself entirely to poetical compositions, and showed therein no promise of his subsequent critical capacity, yet it was precisely this natural development of the critic from his own æsthetic productions, that was destined to raise him far above all his contemporaries in this department of literature. At the same time he gained a deep insight into the machinery

\* He writes to his father, January 20, 1749, "I only wish that I had continued to write comedies; I should now be in very different circumstances. Those that I sent to Vienna and Hanover have been well paid for."

of authorship and journalism, which was of service to him in his own undertakings. Danzel has rightly said, that "Lessing, by his method of study, first secured in Germany due estimation for a new theatre of life, the vocation of the man of letters; and that he was to authorship what, according to Goethe's observation, Klopstock was to poets, in asserting their value to the life of the nation. Before Lessing the scholars in Germany wrote only for scholars. Authorship belonged to the Republic of Learning, a state within a state, a people within a people. Lessing was the first man who, though only twenty years of age, felt in himself the impulse to break through these barriers, and address what he had to say, directly to the body of the nation." Goethe was startled when the ingenious promulgator of craniology, Gall, told him to his face,\* that he was born to be a popular orator; and yet he became a popular orator, who resorted to his pen "because his nation furnished him with no theme for oratory." His predecessor, however, who founded this popular oratory of the quill in Germany, was none other than Gotthold Ephraim Lessing.

\* Or, as the Germans say, "on his head" — this time in a literal sense.



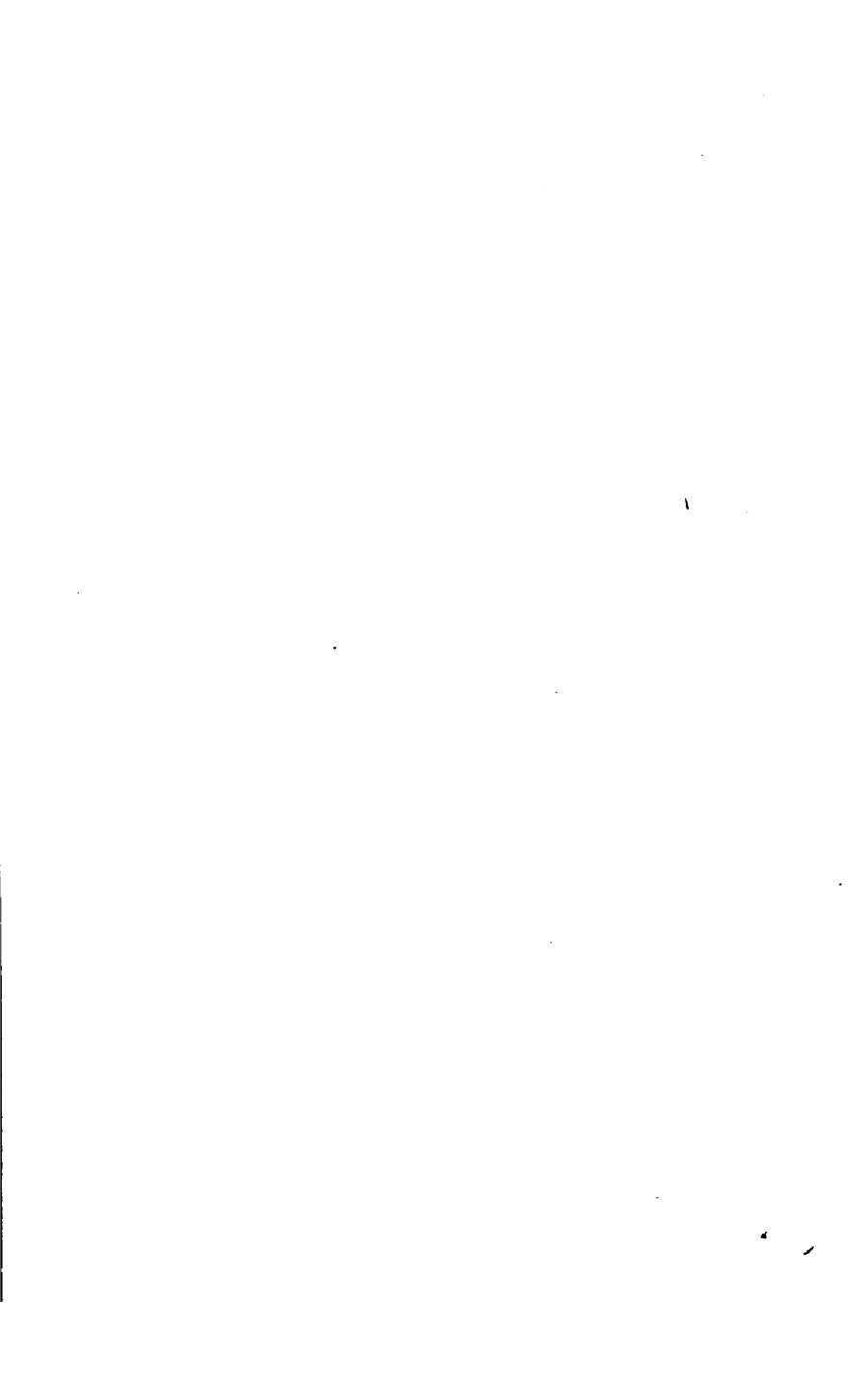
GOTTHOLD EPHRAIM LESSING.

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BOOK SECOND.

FIRST EFFORTS — BERLIN AND WITTENBERG.

1748 — 1752.



## CHAPTER I.

### LESSING AND THE FAMILY.

IN December of the year 1748, Lessing arrived at Berlin. He was not yet twenty years of age; he had no money, no recommendations, no friends, nor acquaintances (excepting only Mylius, who was in a not much better condition than himself), and was provided with no other weapons for his battle with the world than his cheerful courage, his confidence in his own powers, and the discipline acquired through past privations. He was soon to test the worth of these treasures. For though the first pressing necessities of shelter and food were willingly supplied by Mylius, that erratic but warm-hearted friend was too poor to furnish him with an indispensable condition to his securing a hearing from persons able to assist him in finding suitable occupation, namely, decent clothing. Mortifying as it was to him, he was obliged to apply to his parents. This he did four weeks after his arrival in Berlin, but at first without success, as we see from the already oft-quoted letter to his mother. How touching are the following words, underlined by himself: "*I could have obtained employment long before this time, if I had only been able to make a more respectable appearance in my dress.*" Good clothes are absolutely essential to success in a

large city, where people trust mostly to their eyes in forming their estimate of a man. You were kind enough to promise me a new suit nearly a year ago. As I needed it then, you may judge whether my recent request was unnecessary ; though you refuse it under the pretext that I am here in Berlin for the sake of I know not whom." The last words refer to Mylius, the "free-thinker," who was an object of continual fear and distrust to Lessing's parents. His mother, particularly, thought she saw in him an evil spirit, who had seduced her son, although there was not, in fact, the slightest trace of any determining influence from him upon the young man. Nevertheless, for more than three years this subject formed a standing theme for discussion in the correspondence between Lessing and his parents, and the vivacity, and even occasional harshness, of his expressions show to what a state of desperation the youth was often brought by persistent and unjust accusations against the only man who had befriended him in these days of poverty and despondency — a time so bitter that in his after prosperity he never willingly recurred to it. And while the mother refused him the needed help, the father demanded his immediate return home. Lessing declared himself ready to leave Berlin if his parents insisted upon it, in order to show them "that he was not bound up in Mylius." But he flatly refused to accede to his father's request. "I shall not," he writes, "return home. Neither shall I go to any university ; because my stipends are not sufficient to pay my debts, and I cannot ask the necessary sum of you. I shall certainly visit either Vienna, Hamburg, or Hanover. But you may rest assured that wherever I may be, I shall continue to write,

and that I shall never forget the benefits which I have so long received at your hands. I shall find in each of these three places excellent acquaintances and friends. If I acquire nothing else in my pilgrimage, I shall at least learn how to accommodate myself to the world, which will be of great advantage. I shall yet come to some place where such a cobble-stone as myself can be used."

This letter took effect. His parents considered the determination to see the world, and even to go to Catholic Vienna, still more dangerous than a residence in free-thinking Berlin. They accordingly sent him some money, which, with a few self-earned thalers, he immediately applied to the purchase of "a new suit," and was then prepared, as he writes in his letter of acknowledgment, "to let himself be seen by all men, and to address himself personally to those whose assistance he sought." Also, linen, books, and manuscripts, which he had left behind at Kamenz, were finally sent to him after repeated requests. But it was more difficult to satisfy the anxiety of his parents with regard to his future fate. They not only continually assailed him with reproaches, but mortified him exceedingly, and even greatly hindered his advancement, by letters of inquiry and complaint which they, with the best intentions, wrote to various persons in Berlin. The few letters of Lessing to his father, belonging to this period, which have been preserved, — there are three dating from the first half of the year 1749, and three from 1750 to 1753, — reveal to us the youth in all the nobility of his nature. Without once setting aside his child-like reverence, he firmly opposed every unworthy slander. When his father so far forgot him-



self as to charge him with falsehood, he merely answered, "I earnestly beg of you to put yourself in my place for a moment, and consider how painful such reproaches must be, the absurdity of which must be obvious to you, if you have any knowledge whatever of my character." It had been reported at Kamenz that he intended not only to connect himself with the theatre at Vienna, but also to abjure his religion. That such a calumination should find credence with his parents pained him deeply. "From this I can infer," he says, "how greatly you must have been prejudiced against me. But I hope God will give me opportunity to prove clearly my love for my religion as well as for my parents."

However, complaints and reproaches concerning his course of life and his supposed irreligious opinions continued to be the burden of every letter; and he finally broke out in these sorrowful words: "What shall I do then? Shall I enter into circumstantial explanations? Shall I defame my accusers, and, in revenge, uncover their nakedness? Shall I call God and my conscience to witness to my uprightness? I should be obliged to practise less morality than I am accustomed to do, if I were to commit such an error. But time shall be the judge. Time shall decide whether I have reverence for my parents, conviction in my religion, and morality in my conduct. Time shall show whether he is the better Christian who has the maxims of religion by heart, goes to church, and joins in all the ceremonies through force of habit, or he who has once wisely doubted, and has arrived at conviction through deep investigation, or, at least, has endeavored to arrive at it. *The Christian religion is not a thing that ought to be received on*

*trust from one's parents.* The great mass of mankind, it is true, inherit it as they do their property ; but their conduct shows what manner of Christians they are. So long as I see people calling themselves Christians, who fail to keep one of the first commandments of Christianity, — *to love one's enemies*, — so long must I doubt their right to the appellation." With all this independence, it is a fine touch of his filial piety, that, farther on in the same letter, he begs his father, in Latin, not to allow himself to be so much influenced against Mylius by his mother's prejudiced dislike. He seeks, also, in these letters to correct his father's notions concerning his theatrical connections and his poetical labors. One can easily imagine what ideas the family must have formed of Lessing's intercourse with actors, when, at Kamenz, the only approach to a theatre consisted of strolling bands of players, with their buffoons. "My connection with comedians," he wrote, "is wholly different from what you suppose. I have written to Baron Seiller, at Vienna, who is director of all the theatres in Austria — a man whose acquaintance is no disgrace, and may yet be of great assistance to me. I have written also to similar, or, at least, very clever persons, in Dantzic and Hanover, and I believe that it can be no reproach to me to be known in other places besides Kamenz. Do not be distressed because my acquaintances thus far are all comedians. If these know me, then I must necessarily be known by all who see my productions represented by them." He shows, besides, that he is conducting a literary correspondence, which he thinks of extending soon as far as Paris, by writing to Crébillon, whose tragedy of *Catilina* he has begun to translate. The father thought

to put him to his trumps by styling him, ironically, a "German Molière." The worthy pastor primarius, who, probably, knew the French poet only by hearsay, and included him in the general condemnation, was not a little astonished when the son replied, "If the title of 'a German Molière' could rightfully be given to me, I should be sure of an immortal name. To confess the truth, I have a great desire to win it; but Molière's strength and my weakness are two obstacles which can stifle the greatest desire." Yet he adds that he could not repent having chosen for his youthful labors a field of activity which, as yet, only a very few writers had attempted, and where, consequently, honor and success were to be reaped; and at any rate he would "not cease working till he had produced masterpieces." It was also impossible for him to admit the theological scruples and objections of his father. "I cannot," he writes, "comprehend the reason why a writer of comedies should not be a good Christian. A writer of comedies is one who describes the ludicrous side of vice. Does vice, then, deserve so much respect that a Christian may not laugh at it? And if I should promise you to write a comedy which theologians should not only read, but also praise, would you consider my plan impracticable? What if I should compose one against the free-thinkers, and the despisers of your class? I am certain that you would forgive much of its sharpness." We shall see hereafter that Lessing kept this promise, and was not mistaken as to the result.

He had to defend himself, moreover, with regard to the harmless Anacreontic poems on love and wine, which the old gentleman had found amongst the manuscripts

left at home, and, on reading, had branded with a title such as even in our own day stupid zealotism has applied to the Hafiz poems of Goethe. The manner in which Lessing conducted this defence is very remarkable. They are merely school exercises, he says, and owe their existence only to the desire to attempt all kinds of poetry. "One must know me very imperfectly," he continues, "to believe that my feelings harmonize with these verses in the least. They deserve, however, any other title rather than that which you, as an over-rigid theologian, have given them; otherwise the odes and songs of the greatest poet of our time, Hagedorn, would merit a much worse appellation."

Finally, in answer to the charge made by his father that he commenced much, but completed little, he set up as his defence his want of quiet leisure, and then adds, "Nevertheless, if I were to mention all that has been scattered here and there by me (without counting my plays, since most people imagine that these are works which cost as little labor as they bring honor), it would amount to something." This was no empty boast, but the strong consciousness of an heroic diligence, whose fruits were, indeed, not suited to his father's taste. But with a firm sense of his rights the son could refer his father (who revered the ancients) to the words of the Roman poet, —

"Qui nihil aliud quam quod sibi soli placet  
Consulit adversum filium, nugas agit : " \*

words which correspond closely to Saladin's apothegm

\* He is foolish who demands from his son only what is pleasing to himself.

in Nathan the Wise, that "the same bark does not grow on all trees."

Meanwhile Lessing fought his way in Berlin as well as he could. Help first came to him through a recommendation from Mylius to Rüdiger, the proprietor of what was afterwards called Voss's Newspaper, who gave him the charge of arranging his large library. For this work Lessing received for a long time his board, and also some pecuniary compensation; and (what was of still greater importance to him) he increased, by this means, his knowledge of books. A situation, which he held for more than a year, as secretary, or tutor, in the service of Herr von der Golz, who resided in Berlin, and whom he seems to have accompanied to his estates in Poland, procured for him some pecuniary advantages, and also many acquaintances, who made many generous promises. Yet Lessing relied less on these than on his own energy. "I have made such arrangements," he writes to his father at the close of the year 1750, "as will enable me, even without the fulfilment of these promises, to live comfortably this winter in Berlin. What I call *comfort*, others, perhaps, would call *penury*. But what matters it whether I live in plenty or in poverty, if I only live?" It was truly a good time for poor young literati in Berlin, when Lessing was able to write, for the consolation of his parents, "My meals cost me no sort of anxiety in Berlin. I can dine heartily for one groschen and six pfennings." \*

\* About five cents.

## CHAPTER II.

## LITERARY ENTERPRISES.

THE first means which Lessing employed for earning a subsistence in Berlin was translating from foreign languages. He translated several volumes of Rollin's History of Rome, and learned Spanish and Italian for the same purpose. He began a translation of Calderon's "Life a Dream," and of Cervantes' Novels. With all this he did not lose sight of the project to which his father constantly spurred him, of establishing himself as Docent of Philology at Göttingen; and to this end he labored at an essay "On the Pantomimes of the Ancients." The subject had been suggested to him by the appearance of a modern ballet-troupe, whose performances were then incorrectly compared with those of the ancient pantomimes; but the work remained only a sketch, as the Göttingen plan was not carried out.

That the strong interest excited in Lessing for the theatre and dramatic poetry by the Leipsic stage continued in full force at Berlin, is evident from the nature of his first independent labors in that city. During the first year of his sojourn he founded, in connection with Mylius, a Quarterly Review, entitled "Contributions to the History and Reform of the Theatre," which he subsequently changed to the "Theatrical Library," after the former periodical had been suspended in consequence of

a dissension between himself and Mylius. Both enterprises had the same end in view. They were intended to be encyclopædian journals for the whole compass of the drama and the theatre; they were at the same time to furnish preparatory material for a comprehensive history of dramatic poetry, and even the histrionic art was not to be excluded from the plan, which was as broad and magnificent as the intrepid spirit of youth is wont to project. One cannot read without emotion the preface to the "Contributions," dated October, 1749, and which Danzel has proved to be the production of Lessing,\* when one remembers that it is a youth of twenty years, who, from his poor garret, undertakes to reform a whole department of literature and art.

By means of good translations the German public were to be made acquainted, not only with the dramatic literature of the Greeks and Romans, but also with the productions of modern cultivated nations. It is very characteristic for Lessing's after-career, that among these his eye was directed chiefly to the English theatre and Shakspeare; but the Spanish, French, Italian, and Dutch are also not forgotten. And as it was one of Lessing's principal traits always to bring his literary efforts to bear upon actual life, so in this case he pointed out the importance of the dramatic art, not only for the stage-player, but also for the pulpit-orator; for the preachers we see nowadays are frequently only dry "stocks," or "zealots," who are "more like madmen than apostles." Lessing began with the ancients, and, as might be expected, with the Roman poets Plautus and Seneca, to

\* Danzel, I. 177 and 179. The preface is published in the same work, 531-537. See also Lessing's Werke, III. 7. Maltzahn.

whom he had devoted most of his studies. For the Grecian dramatists the work of the Frenchman Brumoy (*Discours sur le Théâtre des Grecs*) seemed sufficient. Already in these first efforts in prose, the dramatic element in Lessing's style shows itself; for he clothes his critical observations on Plautus's Comedy "The Captives" in the form of an epistolary attack on the work by an opponent, and a repulse of the same on his own part.

Throughout this learned philological treatise, Lessing's interest for the real stage, and especially for the modern German stage, stands forth preëminent. The defence of the comedy against the objections of theological zealots was drawn from his own experiences. In all his writings, too, we find reference made to the existing condition of the German stage, which Lessing wished to see employed as an institution for the moral culture of the people.

In its efficiency for this purpose he discovers the chief end of comedy; and it is a significant fact that the poet who afterwards created "Nathan" for the German nation, should have made, in the beginning of his career, the bold assertion that even the sublimest philosophical and religious truths are capable of impressive representation through the drama. Besides, he everywhere insists upon a healthful comprehension of real life, in opposition to the empty abstractions of the more recent dramatists, and employs the old Roman poets to illustrate clearly this difference. Neither does he forget the relation of the actor to dramatic poetry, nor the advantage which antique comedy derived from the use of puns and witticisms in characterizing the degree of culture of the personages introduced. And if the proposition that the



— ancient poets must be judged from the stand-point of their age is now a common-place, it must not be forgotten that Lessing was, in this paper, the first who dared to assert it, in opposition to an age which was only too much disposed to practise from a contrary theory.

Lessing abandoned this enterprise, which was, indeed, so extensive that it would have occupied his whole life, for a reason quite characteristic of his independent disposition. Mylius had affirmed in the journal, that there was no Italian drama. Lessing regarded the whole undertaking as disgraced by this exhibition of ignorance on the part of his collaborator. "I imagined," he says, "every one, not wholly a stranger to Italian literature, calling out to us, 'If you are not better acquainted with the stage among other foreign nations than with that of the Italians, we have fine things indeed to expect from you!'" Consequently he abandoned the journal, which suspended immediately (1750), and entirely on that account, inasmuch as he had been its animating spirit. Yet he continued quietly to labor in the same direction, that he might, in his "Theatrical Library," published four years afterwards (1754–1758), endeavor to carry out alone what he acknowledges would not have been possible for him to accomplish in connection with others.

Meanwhile the "Contributions," although published anonymously, had established for the young *littérateur*, who was known in the literary circles of Berlin as their author, a considerable reputation, which was increased by his activity in a sphere to which he was called by the proprietors of the Berlin Journal, as we shall soon see.

## CHAPTER III.

## LESSING AS FEUILLETONIST IN BERLIN.

ON the 15th of October, 1751, Professor Sulzer, of Berlin, wrote to his countryman Bodmer at Zurich: "A new critic has arisen here, of whose worth you will be able to judge from the accompanying criticism on the 'Messias.' He seems very young, however." At the same time the theologian Spalding inquired, in a letter to Gleim, "What do you think of the courteous and close criticism of the Messias in the Berlin Journal?" The young critic thus condescendingly treated by the Berlin Professor, and, three years afterwards, characterized by him as a young poet, and also "a writer for newspapers, in the service of a Berlin bookkeeper," was none other than Lessing. He was twenty-two years of age when he undertook the literary *feuilleton* of the Berlin Journal. He edited it from February, 1751, till the end of the year, when, as we shall see, he went to Wittenberg again, and after his return to Berlin, continued this critico-literary activity from December, 1752, to October, 1755. He began with a supplement to the regular newspaper, which bore the title "The Latest News from the World of Wit," and was designed to be a kind of literary intelligencer, which, as Lessing stated in his announcement, should "bring information from the realm of those arts and sciences that, with the majority, con-

tribute to pleasure, rather than serve as a serious occupation." The idea of this supplement originated, doubtless, with Lessing. Already, in 1750, when his friend Mylius had fallen out with the proprietor of the paper, the editorship of the political department had been offered to him; but, as he wrote to his father, he was not willing to "lose his time" in such an enterprise, because, on account of the severe censorship then exercised upon the press, he would not have dared to publish anything more liberal in politics than what would be allowed in the privileged newspapers of Rome and Naples at the present day.\* He undertook the feuilleton gladly. It opened to him an arena for necessary and congenial activity. It gave him an opportunity of applying his extensive reading and thorough scholarship, and of expressing publicly a multitude of his own thoughts on the literary interests of the time, which otherwise he could only have thrown out casually in the circle of his individual acquaintances. It offered him a field whereon he could win his critical spurs, and his daily bread besides, which last was a very important advantage to the poor homeless *litterateur*, who had not even finished his university studies with the master's degree, but was still living from hand to mouth as a mere *studiosus medicinæ*. This daily bread was indeed scanty, but the spurs which he won were the genuine golden spurs of critical chivalry. Lessing, who, eighty years later, was distinguished by the celebrated historian of the proud Britons as "beyond all dispute the first critic in Europe,"† appears already, in his twentieth year, far beyond his age in that department.

\* "The dead ride fast" in our times. That comparison with Rome and Naples, written in 1858, is no longer just.

† Macaulay, Essay on Addison.

At this period the literary and æsthetical world was divided into two factions, which together embraced every name of any celebrity or importance in such matters. These were the parties of Leipsic and Zurich — the parties of Gottsched and the Swiss. The distinction between these schools has first been clearly made known to us through the investigations of Danzel. While Gottsched insisted upon exactness of conception, and correctness in form and in fact, and aimed at the creation of a literature on these principles, the Swiss proceeded upon the idea "that poesy rests on something positive — on richness of imagination and creative genius." These antitheses, which, in the progress of the controversy, had developed into the still sharper contrast of law and license, and whose true relations have been put in a proper light by Danzel's work on Gottsched,\* excited Lessing's interest. But instead of siding with either party, or attempting a fruitless union of the two, he placed himself above them both. The very first æsthetical proposition laid down by the young feuilletonist of Berlin was a death-blow to Gottschedianism and its recipes for poetical production. "What is the origin of rules in the fine arts?" was the question. "They are derived," answered Lessing, "from observations made on works of art. These observations have increased from age to age, and are still increasing as often as a genius, which never follows wholly its predecessors, enters upon a new way, or extends beyond the old boundaries the way already known." In the same sense he had, in his poems, commiserated "poor poesy," which was expected to be produced by rule, instead of by the in-

\* Gottsched und seine Zeit. 210. Compare also Danzel's Lessing, I. 192.

spiration of the gods ; and he vindicated creative genius in the following verses : —

“ The spirit which at birth is made a model of its kind,  
Asks not the help of rules that serve to guide the feebler mind ;  
It soars, however bold its flight, right onward, safe and free,  
And all that schools and books can teach, in its own self can see.  
What charms this soul, all souls must charm ; what grieves it,  
saddens all ;  
— It holds the choices of the world within its subtle thrall ! ”

Is it not a strange and touching coincidence that these lines were written in the same year (1749) in which to us Germans our Goethe was born, the Messiah of beauty, destined to fulfil this message of his great forerunner ? All the world was astonished at the boldness with which the young critic of the Berlin Journal dared to enter the lists against the dreaded autocrat of taste in Leipsic ; and it was not long before even Gottsched's most zealous partisans, such as Baron von Schönaich, were obliged to confess that their lord and master himself “ was very much afraid of young Lessing.” Lessing assailed him sometimes with cutting criticism, and again with exquisite humor. In the notice of Gottsched's poems he says, among other things, “ The exterior of the volume is so handsome that it will do great credit to the bookstores, and it is to be hoped that it will continue to do so for a long time. But to give a satisfactory idea of the interior surpasses our powers.” And in conclusion he adds, “ These poems cost two thalers and four groschens. The two thalers pay for the ridiculous, and the four groschens pretty much for the useful.” In like manner he treats Gottsched's “ Critical Art of Poetry.” Yet Lessing is not so unjust as to deny Gottsched's merits altogether ;

he only wishes that he would confine himself within his capacity. The main subject of these critiques, however, was Klopstock, the author of "The Messiah," in whom the Swiss recognized their poetic Messiah, while Gottsched and his adherents assailed him most violently. In opposition to the arrogance of the latter party, Lessing took sides emphatically with Klopstock, whom he acknowledges as the founder of a new literary epoch. The Messiah, he says, will still be called an immortal poem long after the poetry of its opposers shall have been buried in oblivion. He speaks of Gottsched as "sufficiently punished by belonging to a party which is not able to appreciate the great poem which, in spite of its blemishes, will always remain a work by means of which our country can vindicate to herself the honor of possessing creative minds."

He says in another place that only persons defective by nature, or perverted by education, can be insensible to the beauties of this poem, and it is a misfortune that among these are found men who possess a certain degree of authority with the majority of the people. But if Lessing placed himself on the side of those who were assailed by the followers of Gottsched, he was at the same time far from defending the imitators of Klopstock, or even the faults of that great poet's style. The imitators he despatched in his first notice of the Messiah with these words: "When a bold spirit, full of confidence in his original power, presses into the Temple of Taste by a new entrance, hundreds of aping spirits press after him, and hope to steal in through the opening which he has made. But in vain! With the same strength by which he forced the portal, he shuts it behind him. His aston-

ished retinue see themselves excluded, and the immortality of which they dreamed is suddenly changed into derisive laughter." \* Elsewhere he says, "If Gottsched, instead of censuring the Messiah, had turned his weapons against those pedantic witlings who have rendered themselves ridiculous by their unfortunate imitations of this sublime poetic style, we should have applauded him with pleasure. There are only too many who believe that a limping heroic verse, a few Latin constructions, and the absence of rhyme, are sufficient to distinguish them from the rabble of versifiers." He willingly gives over to the derision of Gottsched those imitators who fancied that they were poetizing in the spirit of Klopstock, when they took pains "to be obscure instead of sublime, presumptuous instead of original, and extravagant instead of pathetic;" who declared one another to be great poets; and who brought the work of their master into discredit amongst people who were not acquainted with it; only Klopstock himself should not be made to suffer for the absurdities of his followers. But the extravagant admirers of Klopstock found themselves also admonished by the young critic in a manner which cured them, once for all, of the desire to regard Lessing as an associate of their party. His criticism of the Messiah, which he afterwards embodied in his letters, shows clearly enough that, notwithstanding his respectful recognition of its merits, he perceived the imperfections and feebleness of the poem much more clearly than did the adversaries of Klopstock. However fragmentary this criticism may appear, it is yet in its essence exhaustive; and we can agree with Danzel that it gave a death-blow to the

\* Compare the satire on the imitators and eulogists of Klopstock, I. 19 and 101.

idolatry which had been offered to the poet. The morbid sentimentalism of Klopstock's Odes he exposes in a sentence hardly two lines long, but pointed and keen as a dagger. He says, in his notice of the Ode to God, "The poet laments in these lines the loss, or absence, of an innamorata. He seems to love his maiden as one seraph loves another; and only such affection could be worthy of being spoken of before God. There prevails throughout the entire ode a certain sublime tenderness, which, because it is too sublime, might leave the reader cold." After having added that "a few empty conceits, various tautologies, and commonplaces in gorgeous apparel," may be detected in these odes, he quotes as a specimen the three strophes in which, with all the profusion of seraphic fervor, Klopstock beseeches God to give him back the loved one, —

"Ah, give her to me; easy for Thee to give;  
Give her to my trembling, timorous heart," &c.,—

and concludes with these inimitably roguish words: "What presumption, to beg thus earnestly for a woman!" Does not a whole book of criticism lie in these nine words? The extravagance of Klopstock was altogether irksome to the healthy nature of Lessing. This is expressed in his first epigram, whose four lines characterize strikingly the poet and his admirers, as well as Lessing's own views: —

#### EPIGRAM.

##### TO THE READER.

"Who will not mighty Klopstock praise?  
Will everybody read him? Nay!  
A little less extol our lays,  
And read a little more, we pray."



Danzel remarks with perfect justice, in reference to this critical *début* of Lessing, "It is not his later works that must fill us with the greatest admiration, for they are the production of the mature man, who had become well versed in various literatures, and knew the best of each. But the astonishing thing is, that the young man of twenty-two was able to place himself with such freedom, firmness, and adroitness, above both of the parties, to one of which, at that time, every one must belong, as it were, by a Solon's law."

And it is not less astonishing that in these first fruits of the young giant all the great qualities of the man appear; his aversion to all barren pedantry and theological intolerance; his deep abhorrence of French frivolity; his strong religious sense, impelling him continually to words and works of love; his noble patriotism, and strict adherence to justice; his unerringly keen eye for the good and the true, as well as for the detection of sham. And all this appears united with an elegance and perspicuity of style, an acuteness and aptness of language and expression, and an ease and sportive grace in method and treatment, such as few writers of that day even dreamed of. It was these latter qualities which gave an irresistible charm to all he wrote, and which make us even now read with pleasure his notices of the dryest books, such as Jöcher's Dictionary of Learned Men, or a dull book of travels. One needs only to run over his newspaper criticisms for 1751 in order to be convinced of his power to interest.

At a time when German national feeling lay in a deep sleep, he felt it as a national disgrace that the German poet Klopstock should be indebted to the King of Denmark for a pension which should give him the

necessary leisure to complete his work. "An excellent testimony for our times," he exclaims, "which will doubtless go down to posterity. We do not know whether all people will perceive as much satire in it as we do. We will therefore abstain from all amplification. Perhaps we see more than we ought to see." Nevertheless, he cannot help returning to the subject: "A rewarded poet is a great rarity nowadays; this wonder becomes far greater, however, when the poet is a *German*, and if his songs breathe only religion and virtue." This refers to the French poet Piron, whom some unknown patron of his licentious muse had rewarded with an annual stipend; and Lessing wrote these words in Berlin, the capital of a king who despised German literature, and under whose encouragement a frivolous French school was everywhere spreading with parasitical wantonness. But just here, in the midst of the foreign levities of La Mettrie, and Maupertuis, Algarotti, D'Arnoud, D'Argens, and Voltaire, Lessing, young and ardent, attached himself with fervor to his country, and discovered again, for contemporaries and for posterity, the well-nigh abandoned German nationality. French taste ruled not only in Berlin, but throughout all Germany. This was reason enough for the young critic to attack it everywhere. He praises a small French *brochure* on a religious subject the more heartily because in this language we now rarely find anything but "obscenities and blasphemies," and because "the French writings are countless which undermine religion, and infuse, under seductive images, the most disgraceful sensuality."

But however earnestly he defended morality and religion because French levity threatened to destroy the

good with the evil, he opposed, just as decidedly, all theological intolerance and priestly narrowness. He who longed for the day, and trusted in its coming, when it would "be conformable to decorum to be called a good Christian, as now public opinion demands that so long as one is in good health he shall be considered an atheist," at the same time scourged, with all the force of his cutting words, every form of intolerance. His motto even then was, *Well-doing is the main thing — belief is secondary*. "To patch up a system of religion before one has thought how to bring men to the harmonious exercise of their duties is an inane conceit. Are two vicious dogs made good by being imprisoned in one kennel? *It is not agreement in opinions, but agreement in virtuous actions, that renders the world peaceful and happy!*" It seems to him a matter of congratulation that here and there a theologian still directs attention to the practical in Christianity, "at a time when the majority lose themselves in fruitless controversies; now condemning a harmless Moravian, and now furnishing, by their self-styled refutations, new material for the derision of scoffers at religion; spending their time in quarrelling about impossible plans of union before they have laid the foundations for them by purifying their hearts from bitterness, rancor, and calumny, and by disseminating that love which alone is the true characteristic of a Christian." "But truly," he remarks on another occasion, "everything else can be made agreeable to a man sooner than his duty; and the art of representing the yoke of religion as an easy yoke is so difficult that not every theologian can possess it. Hence it comes that for one work of this kind we find twenty in

which theology is carried on as a sophistry which exerts no influence on life. The intermediate state — the last judgment — the millennial kingdom — the nature of the glorified body, — these subjects are still discussed in thick folios, and at least furnish excellent themes to keep alive the wit of the scoffers. But to disarm these scoffers by a life controlled by the spirit of religion, and by doctrines whose sublime simplicity testifies to their divine origin, is a work which most people are unwilling to undertake, because the Moravians have made it the principle of their conduct." On this account he repeatedly took the Moravians under his powerful protection, while, on the other hand, he was not weary of assailing the narrow zeal of the theologians. Thus he concludes his notice of Heumann's "Interpretation of the New Testament" with the bitterly ironical words, "It would be a pity if the author should obtain general approbation in his interpretation of various passages; for thereby the professional divines would be at once deprived of a fruitful source of contentions, wherein they are now able to exhibit their erudition as incontestably as their stiffneckedness." He praises Klopstock especially because he knew how to represent religion in all its splendor where it merits our reverence, and to describe its exalting mystery in such a manner that "we are glad to forget its incomprehensibility, and lose ourselves in admiration;" and, finally, because "he knew how to excite in his readers the wish that Christianity might be true, even supposing we were so unhappy as that it were not true."

It is evident that in Lessing, at twenty-two years of age, all the thoughts and convictions were already

awakened which crowned the life-work of the mature man in the composition of "Nathan the Wise." Even the high estimation of the "oft more than Christian virtue" of the Mussulmanic Arabs was not wanting. And in noticing a romance, the scene of which is laid at Constantinople, he observes, in the spirit of Nathan, "If a pious Moslem should read the book, he would constantly be constrained to cry out, 'What blasphemies!' and yet it is these very blasphemies which will edify many an honest Christian."

But those articles of the young critic which pertain to other departments of knowledge evince no less ripeness of thought and judgment. The contemptibleness and coarse vulgarity of what was then considered German comedy, the scholastic pedantry and empty declamation which then usurped the place of erotic poetry, the silly trifling of the existing Anacreontic poets, the would-be antique taste which rejected rhyme in lyrical poetry, are exposed in all their nakedness by Lessing, while at the same time he, half sportively, lays down the basis of a correct theory, and exemplifies it practically in his own creations. He shows the wretchedness of the fables of the famous Danish poet Holberg, and directs attention to the letters and poems of Gellert, which are full of thought and natural simplicity. He even ventures to cope with the magnates of French literature, which then ruled the world — Voltaire, Diderot, Rousseau. At the close of an extended notice of Diderot's Letter to Batteux on the Deaf and Dumb, &c., in which Lessing characterizes the style of this author in a few master strokes, he says of him, "A short-sighted dogmatist who is determined never to doubt the propositions which con-

stitute his system, and which he has committed to memory, will be able to discover a multitude of errors in this treatise. Our author is one of those philosophers who take more pains to make clouds than to scatter them. *Wherever they let their eyes fall, the pillars of the most familiar truths begin to tremble*, and what one expected to see close before him is lost in an uncertain distance. They lead us, 'in ways full of darkness, to the resplendent throne of truth' (Kleist), whilst schoolmasters lead us in ways full of imaginary light to the gloomy throne of lies. Suppose, even, that such a philosopher ventures to contradict opinions which we hold sacred. The harm is slight. His dreams or truths — whichever we choose to call them — will do as little injury to society as theirs will do much, who try to bring all thinking men under the yoke of their own thought." Here, too, the wise Nathan chimes in. Voltaire, to be sure, is only slightly touched; and Lessing appears at this time, while under the influence of the great man's strong personality, to have been somewhat prepossessed in favor of his poetical productions. But his criticism of Rousseau's Prize Essay concerning the injurious effects of the arts and sciences upon the moral development of mankind must be regarded as a work that inaugurated a new epoch in the world of thought. Rousseau had already, in his thirty-eighth year, begun his career with the enunciation of the greatest paradox that the cultivated world has yet been offered. The saying of a priestly sophist, which has become so notorious in our own day, that science must *turn back* in order to progress, is only a faint echo of the assertion of the man of Geneva; namely, that each and every science is

in fact a misfortune to humanity, and ought to be so regarded by both morality and religion. His Essay, in which fanaticism and vanity were alike gratified by the assertion of an unheard-of proposition, was crowned with a prize by the Academy of Dijon, in 1750. A few months afterwards Lessing exposed the utter untenableness of this paradox. His article is a masterpiece of criticism. He first gives a complete survey of Rousseau's course of thought, and then begins his review with a confession which does him even more honor than the successful refutation of the plausibilities of his author which follows. The partiality and even absurdity with which Rousseau exalted the simplicity of nature in contrast to the unnatural distortions of the existing state of culture, did not blind Lessing to the magnificence of the fundamental idea, nor prevent him from vindicating the measure of truth which it contained. He confesses that he feels "a secret reverence for the man who speaks a word for virtue in opposition to all received prejudices, even when he goes too far." "How much better would it be for France," he exclaims, "if she had many such preachers!" Then with one blow he dashes in ruins this edifice of paradoxes which was then astonishing the world. He shows that the prosperity of the sciences and the decline of morals and of the state "are two concomitant things, which, however, do not bear to each other the relation of cause and effect." He proves that Rousseau's knowledge of history is throughout defective, and his inferences, therefore, false. "Everything in this world," he says, "has a certain period of growth. A state grows till it reaches this point, and so long as it grows, arts and sciences develop with it. If it falls, therefore, it is not

because these have undermined it, but simply because nothing in this world is capable of ever-enduring growth; and because it has now reached the summit from which it must descend with incomparably greater velocity than it ascended. All great structures fall with time, whether they are built with art and ornamentation, or without them. It is true luxurious Athens has departed; but did virtuous Sparta flourish much longer?" Rousseau had asserted that the arts and sciences diminished the martial qualities of a people. Lessing answered, that it is still a question whether we are to regard that fact as a happiness or a misfortune. "Are we put into this world," he exclaims, "merely to put each other out of it?" "And if the arts and sciences are injurious to severe morals, they are not so in their nature, but only by their abuse. Is painting to be abolished because this or that master produces seductive pictures? Is poetry to be lightly esteemed because some poets desecrate its harmonies by impurity? Both of these arts can serve virtue." And so he concludes with the simple proposition, "The arts are what we choose to make them. The fault is in ourselves if they are injurious to us." It is well known that Lessing was sufficiently antique in thought and feeling to regard a state censorship as fully justifiable in the department of the formative arts, while he denounced every limitation of freedom in scientific investigation as tyranny, as an *attentat* against the sovereignty of truth.\* Four years later Lessing showed himself kind and just towards Rousseau, in a notice of his essay "*De l'Origine de l'Inégalité parmi les Hommes*," and proved that he properly appreciated the moral side of the writer's convictions.

\* Laokoön, II.



In this criticism he says, amongst other things, that Rousseau is here, again, "the bold philosopher, who regards no prejudices, however popular, but goes straight-way to the truth, without caring for the shams which he is obliged to destroy at every step. His heart also sympathizes in all his speculations, and he therefore speaks in a wholly different tone from that employed by the sophist, whom selfishness or ostentation has made a teacher of philosophy"—a distinction which, as the most recent historian of the literature of the eighteenth century rightly observes,\* goes to the pith of the matter, and reveals the nicest appreciation of the whole spirit of Rousseau's writings. Lessing's culture rested on the basis of classical antiquity; but his enthusiasm for these studies did not blind him to their weaknesses and blemishes. Though so young, he already possessed, what is rare at any age, that just estimate of ancient authors which is able to distinguish between the value of their writings, for the knowledge of past civilization contained in them, and their absolute worth. On one occasion, in treating of modern love poetry, he comes to speak of Ovid. He esteems Ovid's "Art of Love" invaluable, because through it we obtain almost our only picture of social culture amongst the Romans; a just conception, as he expresses it, "of the gentility of the old Romans, of their fine manners, their taste for amusements, the tone of their society, the direction of their tender feelings." Nevertheless, he does not conceal the fact that, from another point of view, the poem must receive a different sentence; and, considered from this side, "it contradicts its title." "If Ovid taught the art of love, he would be the most amiable and innocent of poets. The most

\* Hettner, Th. II. 426.

modest youth would read him, and that impulse of nature would become a guide to virtue ; whilst, in fact, to those who do not know how to interpret him aright, he becomes a seducer to the foulest excesses. Ovid taught voluptuousness—that lust without love which *roves from pleasure to pleasure, and languishes even in the midst of enjoyment.*” Might not one believe that Goethe had these words before his mind in the exclamation of his sensualized Faust? —

“ Thus from desire I reel into enjoyment,  
And ‘midst enjoyment languish for desire.”

And with all this clearness of perception and delicacy of sentiment, what great erudition does this young critic exhibit in his notices of such works as *Chaufepié’s Supplement to Bayle’s Dictionary*, and *Jöcher’s Dictionary of Learned Men* ! It is evident that he had made excellent use of the aged Rüdiger’s library, which, on his arrival at Berlin, he had undertaken to arrange, and that he had devoted much attention to the department of biography, for which he felt an early inclination that lasted through his whole life. He had thus gathered a store of knowledge, which might well excite the envy of many a professor of that day.\* And so versatile was the genius of this great man, that he was even then a more mature statesman than most men of his time ; so that he saw clearly through the inadequacy of all abstract theories in what was then called the “art of government,” and had only an ironical smile for the placid pedants, who, by means of systematic deliberations in their libraries, thought to exert some practical influence in this department. “Another book by a pedant on the

\* Danzel, I. 173, 216.

art of government," — thus he begins his notice of such a work, — "which would be excellent, if the art of government were a thing which a scholar is competent to discuss ; or, rather, if it were not something so often changed by outward circumstances, that he who attempts to construct a system out of its manifestations, proves only that he has brought from school very pretty notions about the happiness of the people, the true greatness of a ruler, and the like." He wishes, wholly in the spirit of antiquity, that politics should be treated only by politicians, state craft and the art of government solely by practical statesmen and rulers. "Let us leave such matters," he continues, with deferential allusion to the great Prussian king, "to those whom Providence has chosen to exercise them, especially to him whom *Nature was obliged to make a philosopher, because she wished to make him a model for kings.* But even he would be able to write a perfect art of government only for those who should find themselves exactly in his circumstances ; his work would be useless to those who think less sublimely, or who rule in other times, and over other nations." Does not a whole volume of political wisdom lie in these few plain words — wisdom to which it is well to take heed in our day also ?

In the notice of his own songs, and of the first two volumes of his prose writings, he appears as self-critic, free from false modesty, and yet with no trace of an author's vanity ; always clear, reasonable, justly conscious of his own strength, and sure of his progressive development. Thus, in the review of his "Trifles" (1751), which he had already published, in part, three years before, he says, "Can any one blame the author if his taste

was less refined three years ago than it is now, perhaps?" How amiable and graceful here is this "perhaps"! From what has hitherto been communicated, it is easy to obtain a conception of the charm and elegance, as well as of the clearness and precision of style and language, which were, even thus early, remarkable in Lessing. He himself scourges with unsparing severity the crudeness and negligence with which the German language was then (and is still, to some extent) employed in translating from foreign tongues. And in reference to the fury for translations which prevailed then, as now, in Germany, and which eagerly grasped at the most worthless material, he exclaims, "Because Richardson and Fielding have prepossessed us in favor of English novels, is it allowable to thrust upon us all manner of rubbish from this language?" The epigrammatic poignancy of the expressions and sentences which lends such an irresistible charm to Lessing's later writings is foreshadowed in these youthful productions. In one place he says, "Nothing is easier than to amplify Bayle; but to do so *Bayleistically*, is quite another thing." In his notice of Gellert's "Model-Letters," the whole theory of epistolary style is concentrated in one sentence — "The whole *art* of writing beautiful letters consists in writing them *artlessly*;" and Herder's famous saying, that "The noblest occupation of man is man,"\* was uttered by Lessing † while Herder was yet learning to read in a village

\* It is with these words that Lessing begins his criticism of "*L'Esprit des Nations*." In this criticism he also utters the bold proposition, "Properly speaking, there are only physical reasons why nations differ so much in passions, talents, and bodily skill; *for what are called moral causes are only the consequences of physical causes.*"

† Mr. Stahr seems to forget that Pope's well-known line, "The proper

school. The craving to discuss only the newest things in a *feuilleton* cannot be more gracefully ridiculed than in Lessing's words, when, in noticing a poetical production which had appeared a year before (1750), he says, alluding to the Latin numerals of the date (MDCCL.), "Ought we to suppose that an extract from this poem would be displeasing merely because there is no *I* after the *L* on the title-page?"

These evidences of the quality as well as of the extent of the labors in which Lessing engaged as critic of an otherwise utterly insignificant newspaper, are nearly all selected from his articles for the year 1751. They would be greatly increased, if we were in like manner to examine the papers from 1752 to 1755. We should then see how he directs attention to the excellence of Cervantes' novels, and the importance of Aristotle's *Poetics*; how, with a gentle but firm hand, he rebukes the then rising Wieland for his great diffuseness of style, and his excessive book-making; and how, inspired by genuine national feeling, he continues his polemic against French arrogance, in which, on occasion of a controversy between Voltaire and another French *bel esprit*, wherein an assault was made against the Germans, he once breaks out with the exclamation, "Cannot, then, a pair of French witlings hold a controversy without declaring, at least once or twice, that the Germans are devoid of wit and taste? Do we so often reproach them with an equal want of sound and healthy understanding?" But, indeed, the admonition which an amiable Frenchman, Bernard, had lately given to his nation, not to despise

study of mankind is man," was written when Lessing was only four years old. — TRANS.

foreign countries, will, as Lessing thinks, be repeated numberless times in vain by shrewd Frenchmen to their fellow-citizens. On the whole, Voltaire is somewhat more sharply criticised in the articles of the next three years, and the derision of his *Vers Techniques*, in which he had given a summary of all the names and principal achievements of the German emperors, is of cutting keenness. "Regarding this work," says Lessing, "which in Germany is left to the lowest order of minds, it is to be feared that if the poet remains much longer in Germany, he will at length deem himself privileged to make even chronodisticha, and that perhaps for no other reason than to adapt himself to the taste of the nation in which he lives; as, for example, in France he wrote the *Henriade*, and in England, *Brutus*, and the *Death of Cæsar*." The double sting of this epigram is only too palpable; and that young Lessing dared to assail the master of wit with his own weapon, was a boldness much greater in the eyes of his contemporaries than it is in ours.\* Nevertheless, on another occasion he knew how to recognize suitably Voltaire's new and fruitful historical method.†

In surveying these earliest critical essays as a whole, we see that Lessing's activity was by no means without plan, but that his articles exhibit clearly an underlying connection.‡ For they embrace the whole circle of the æsthetic and literary interests of that time, whose chief points he constantly brought into notice, and treated

\* In the genial work, "*De l'Allemagne*," Madame de Stael remarks, "*Mais ce qui importe à l'histoire de la littérature c'est qu'un Allemand ait eu le courage de critiquer un grand écrivain français, et de plaisanter avec esprit le prince des moqueurs, Voltaire lui-même.*" — TRANS.

† Compare Hettner *Geschichte der Literatur des 18. Jahrh.* II. 212.

‡ Danzel, I. 212.

exhaustively in all that was essential, notwithstanding the apparently fragmentary form of his papers. Finally, they reveal to us, in the critic of twenty-two years of age, a man who knows how to treat independently all the subjects under discussion, to put them in their proper places, to measure their scope, and estimate their worth.

## CHAPTER IV.

## LESSING AND VOLTAIRE IN BERLIN.

AFTER three years of labor in the province of æsthetic production and historical criticism had elapsed, Lessing resolved to leave Berlin for a time, and give another direction to his studies. Many circumstances combined to bring him to this determination. He had disagreed with Mylius about the publication of the "Contributions," and the periodical itself, which he had begun with so many confident hopes, had been abandoned. To the production of original dramas there was wanting the stimulus of a stage, which Berlin did not then possess. He had concluded his lyrical efforts by a collection of the same, which he published in 1751, under the title of "Trifles." How he regarded these poems is evident from his own critique and the subsequent preface to the first volume of his writings. The great applause with which these verses were everywhere received, did not deceive their author as to their real significance. Already the truth of Goethe's words had dawned upon his mind, that "the muse may be a companion, but is not a guide for life ;" and his own epigram —

"Indeed, that you're a poet I am glad ;

*But are you nothing more? Ah! that's too bad!"* —

expresses this truth in plain terms.

In the exigencies that attended his *début* in Berlin, he



had been forced into forming acquaintances and relations which became more and more irksome to him. Besides, his employment as a journalist could not satisfy his intellectual needs. He felt that, with regard to his hitherto acquired capital of knowledge, "he would be obliged, like his friend Mylius, to spend what he possessed without being able to earn anything in addition."

He resolved, therefore, in order to continue his studies, to go to Wittenberg, where his second brother had just entered the university. An additional motive for this step was the expediency of embellishing the independent position which he had won in literature by an academical degree, and of exchanging his title of student of medicine, by which he was still known, for that of a duly appointed master of the liberal arts. But before leaving Berlin he became involved in an affair concerning the most celebrated writer of the century, Voltaire, who was then residing in that city, which endangered the reputation of the young scholar, while it opened to him an acquaintance with the great man, which had not been vouchsafed during his three years' labor in kindred pursuits. Lessing's first contact with Voltaire occurred in the commencement of his sojourn at Berlin, through a singular incident connected with an episode in the career of that illustrious personage, which casts an unpleasant light upon his characteristics, and which French national vanity has hitherto kept concealed.

The story must be related here in full, since the exact details are not generally known, whilst Lessing's subsequent feelings towards Voltaire receive therein their first satisfactory explanation.\*

\* The sources of information on this point are Klein's *Annalen der Gesetzgebung*, V. 215-257, and the Writings of Frederic the Great.

Soon after his arrival in Berlin, Lessing had made the acquaintance of a French teacher of languages, Richier de Louvain, a good-natured, assiduous young man, whose society was as profitable to him in his study of the French language and literature, as his own knowledge of German character and German authors was of advantage to his teacher. It was this Richier, afterwards appointed private secretary to Voltaire, who one day sought out his young friend in his garret near the court of St. Nicholas's Church,\* in order to make him a proposal, which fulfilled one of Lessing's ardent wishes, in procuring for him a personal acquaintance with the great Voltaire. The celebrated poet of the *Henriade* had, at that time (1750), become involved in an extremely suspicious, and, as regarded his reputation, dangerous, lawsuit. The subject of litigation against the greatest mind of France was nothing less than a charge of illegal financial operations, violence of various kinds, and forgery; and a process had already been instituted in the Berlin Court of Exchequer. In this trial Voltaire conducted his case, for the most part, with pleas and rejoinders elaborated by himself. For these he needed a German translator, and Richier proposed his pupil. Lessing, who was then dependent on such labors for his daily bread, naturally accepted the proposal with readiness.

It was no trifle for the poor scholar, who, at that

\* Lessing was then so poor that he at first occupied one room with his elder countryman Neumann, surnamed "The Little Banger" (*Der kleine Bauzner*). The first lodging of his own in Berlin was "a very small room" in the second story of "a very small house," near the court of St. Nicholas's Church. It is the house now marked No. 10, rebuilt a few years since. Its former appearance is preserved only in a drawing which the family of Lessing's friend, David Friedländer, had engraved on copper. The house, even at the present day, is *not* distinguished by an inscription!

time, like all the rest of the world, looked up to Voltaire with reverence and admiration, to approach, personally, this great man, to labor for him, to go daily from his own garret to Voltaire's table in the tower of the Royal Palace, and to be permitted to enjoy his conversation, however scanty it might be. But by this work of translation, Lessing became gradually initiated into the details of this remarkable lawsuit, the issue of which all Berlin watched with intense curiosity, and which proved much less favorable to the illustrious author than to his opponent. This opponent was a Jewish banker in Berlin, by the name of Abraham Hirsch, and the matter in dispute was as follows: King Frederic II., in the treaty of Dresden, which ended the second Silesian war, had sought by a special article to provide for the interests of such of his subjects as might be possessed of Saxon paper money, the so-called tax-receipts. That article stipulated that these receipts should be redeemed by Saxony at their full nominal value. Now, inasmuch as the current value of these bills had fallen considerably even in Saxony, speculation was likely to take the matter in hand; and three years afterwards Frederic was constrained to publish an express prohibition against the acceptance of tax receipts in Prussia. But the great king was destined to realize, through his own friend and favorite, that the changes of the money market are not to be regulated by legislation. For the author of the *Henriade* had scarcely reached Berlin when his speculative spirit saw at once the great advantages which his position as the king's favorite gave him\* for stockjob-

\* How every one in Berlin at that time bowed before Voltaire, is related by Formey in his "*Souvenirs d'un Citoyen*," I. 235.

bing with Saxon paper money, which one needed only to purchase in Saxony, and smuggle into Prussia, in order, by selling it again to the Saxon authorities, to convert it into specie at a gain of about thirty per cent. Voltaire was avaricious. From his youth up, his endeavor, as Goethe expresses it in his mild way, had been directed towards wholesale gain. He sought intimate connection with the grandees of the earth, and made use of this connection for his own purposes, because he wished to belong to this favored class. But even if he loved money only as a means to freedom ("Seldom," says Goethe, "has any one made himself so dependent for the sake of independence"), still it ought not to be concealed that to obtain the fortune which enabled him afterwards to lead a princely life at Ferney, he did not shrink from methods which stained his fame and character. His conduct in Berlin was of such a nature. He associated himself with a Jewish banker, Abraham Hirsch, and induced him to go to Dresden in order to purchase there, on his own account, Saxon tax-receipts to a large sum. As the Hebrew feared detection and punishment, Voltaire represented the matter in such a light that he appeared certain of the tacit consent of his patron, the king,—a deception which was easily believed at that time because he could really lay claim to great influence, and, as the declared favorite, was in the habit of receiving in his own audience chamber princes and ambassadors of foreign powers, whom he treated with humiliating haughtiness. Abraham Hirsch, therefore, finally agreed to undertake the business. He received from Voltaire, partly in cash, and partly in drafts on Paris, the large sums necessary to purchase the desired Saxon bills, and

gave, as security, a number of valuable diamonds. Scarcely had he started for Dresden when a brother in faith and rival in business, the afterwards well-known farmer of the mint, Ephraim, announced himself to Voltaire, and succeeded in exciting his distrust of Abraham Hirsch, and in representing himself as a more suitable agent for the business, inasmuch as he offered to procure tax-receipts to double the amount proposed, in obtaining which he asked only the protection and patronage of the favorite. Voltaire was so imprudent as to accept this offer. He wrote to Paris, and caused the bills of exchange given in favor of Hirsch to be protested there, without notifying him of the proceeding. In consequence of this step Hirsch became extremely embarrassed, and returned to Berlin without having accomplished his mission. He waited upon Voltaire, and with great humility of manner, but with bitter words, reproached him for his faithlessness, demanded indemnification, and threatened judicial prosecution. However, an amicable arrangement was at last made by which Voltaire promised to indemnify his defrauded partner by purchasing the diamonds, a portion of which had already been left with him as security. But here, too, Ephraim became the evil genius of both. He succeeded in convincing Voltaire that he had been deceived by Hirsch as to the value of the diamonds, although they had been estimated by the court jeweller, Reclam, whilst the jewellers who had appraised them anew for Ephraim were mere tools of this rich Hebrew. Voltaire now acted with extreme violence. He summoned Hirsch to the room of a friend of his, an officer of high rank, abused him with angry words, took possession by force of other jewels which Hirsch had

brought for examination, in order to satisfy himself for the alleged cheat, and by his influence obtained a warrant against him, which so terrified the father of the poor Jew that he fell by a stroke of apoplexy and died; in short, Voltaire behaved in Berlin as haughty *seigneurs* in his native country were accustomed to behave towards their inferiors. At the same time he had sufficient tact to appear publicly as the plaintiff. He entered a complaint which completely metamorphosed the whole affair. He denied everything that related to the tax-receipts, and even forged a record to prove his innocence. He then offered, in a memorial to the court, to swear that this record was not a forgery! The court, convinced to the contrary, did not permit him to take the oath, and thus saved him from actual perjury; it even sentenced his opponent to pay a small fine, on account of a formal transgression. But the matter did not end here. For the Jew, now driven to extremities, asserted that M. de Voltaire had been guilty of a fraudulent exchange of the jewels consigned to him, and offered to furnish proofs of this charge. The opportunity was granted him by the court. But the author of the *Henriade* did not deem it advisable to await this testimony, and hastened to make a compromise with Hirsch, by which the latter received considerable advantage, and Voltaire suffered a loss of a thousand thalers. The Jew assented to the arrangement, since money, and not revenge, was his object. Thus Voltaire came out of this dishonorable transaction with a lighter purse. But what was still worse, the esteem of the great king for the moral character of the man whom he admired as the most gifted writer of his century was forfeited forever. Voltaire had, in the beginning of the business, confidently relied on the

royal favor ; but he soon found that Frederic allowed no trifling with matters of justice. As soon as the affair was brought to the king's notice, he ordered it "to be investigated with impartial strictness," and immediately released the imprisoned Jew.

To Voltaire he wrote, "The transaction with the Saxon tax-receipts is known in Saxony, and much complaint has been made to me on that account." He even declined the visit of the poet, who wished to follow him to Potsdam, in these words : "If you surrender yourself to every outburst of passion, and stir up continual strife, you will confer no pleasure on me by coming here, and may just as well stay in Berlin." When, finally, Voltaire announced to him that he had won the suit, the king's congratulations were made in so sarcastic a manner as to leave no doubt as to his opinion concerning the affair : "I congratulate you on the success of your suit. I am very glad that this ugly business has at length come to an end, and hope that henceforth you will avoid all quarrels with either the Old or the New Testament, for thereby your honor is always injured ; and not even your talents as the greatest intellect of France can cover the stains upon your fair fame." But the satirical comedy, *Tantale en Procès* (Tantalus at Law), wherein Frederic ridicules the avaricious poet, is still more clear in condemnation. A very humorous representation of the whole matter, which serves as a preface to the comedy, confirms, at the same time, the documentary evidence of the transaction in every particular. And Lessing? One can easily imagine what this purest of men, whose whole life proves his scrupulous honor and unselfish magnanimity, especially in money matters, must have

felt, when, as translator, he obtained a knowledge of this foul scheme, and by his penetrating acuteness discovered the whole truth. But so noble was this splendid man, that in none of his letters — not even when Voltaire's meanness had involved himself and his friend Richier in undeserved difficulty — did he ever use the information thus obtained to Voltaire's injury. His nice sense of honor made him silent, because he had obtained his knowledge through Voltaire himself, though the great schemer had no intention of imparting it. Even the epigrams which Lessing composed on the suit, and communicated orally to a few friends, were not published till some time afterwards, and then without giving any names. They show clearly what Lessing thought of Voltaire's position in that affair. His avarice is well characterized in the epigram styled "The Avaricious Poet : " —

" You ask why Poet Semir, he whom all men praise, should be  
A miser rich. Because *true poets starve*, is Fate's decree ! "

After Lessing's death, a sheet was found among his papers, on which was written, in reference to one of the fables of Phædrus, " The real moral is this, that it is a very delicate matter to settle a quarrel wherein both parties are known to be cheats. Thus, in the lawsuit which took place some years ago between Voltaire and Hirsch, one might well say to the Jew, *Tu non videris perdidisse quod petis!*\* and to Voltaire, *Te credo surripuisse quod pulchre negas!*" †

But still more severe is Lessing's sentence in another

\* Thou dost not seem to have lost what thou seekest.

† I believe thou hast stolen what thou dost cunningly deny.



epigram, at the conclusion of which the reason why "the slyest Hebrew of Berlin" did not succeed in "cozening the wittiest of the wits of France" is given in these words : —

"The reason why this cunning Jew failed in his knavery,  
Is simply that he found a greater knave in Monsieur V.!"

It was with this man that the young German writer was now to be involved in a difficulty, which threatened to fix a grievous stain on his character through Voltaire's passionate temper and petty suspicions.

After the conclusion of his suit, Voltaire had left Berlin, in the spring of 1751, and gone, with his secretary Richier, to Potsdam, where he finished his *Siècle de Louis XIV.* When he returned to Berlin, in December, Lessing induced his friend Richier, under the seal of secrecy, to lend him for a few days, for the purpose of reading it, the first part of the yet unpublished work. An unfortunate accident, brought about by Lessing's good nature and the indiscretion of one of his friends, resulted in Voltaire's discovering the affair. The philosopher, enraged that any one had seen his new work before it had been presented to the royal family, and giving way to the worst suspicions, sent immediately for his secretary. Richier confessed the whole story, endeavored to palliate his fault by his friendship for Lessing, and hastened to him to obtain the copy of the manuscript. Unfortunately, however, Lessing, who did not dream of any trouble, had left Berlin, and, what was still worse, had taken the borrowed book with him. Thereupon Voltaire's anger broke loose. He overwhelmed Richier with the lowest invectives; accused

him of having purloined the work in order to have it translated, or even pirated, by Lessing ; compelled him on the spot to write, under dictation, an insulting letter to his friend, demanding the return of the manuscript ; and then drove the unhappy young man from his service in disgrace. This letter is no longer extant ; but Lessing's answer, which accompanied the return of the borrowed book, is still preserved. It was written in French, because the writer, suspecting the state of the case, intended that Voltaire should read it also. And so it happened ; but Voltaire, into whose hands the letter fell, did not deem it advisable to communicate its contents even to his discharged secretary, who first heard of its existence thirty-two years later, — after the death of his friend, — through Lessing's brother Charles, who found the first draught among the papers of the deceased. It is too characteristic of both parties not to deserve a place here.

“ Vous me croyez donc capable, monsieur, d'un tour des plus traitres ? et je vous parais assez méprisable, pour me traiter comme un voleur, qui est hors d'atteinte ! On ne lui parle raison, que parceque la force n'est pas de mise.

“ Voilà l'exemplaire, dont il s'agit. Je n'ai jamais eu le dessein de le garder. Je vous l'aurois même renvoyé sans votre lettre, qui est la plus singulière du monde. Vous m'y donnez des vues que je n'ai pas. Vous vous imaginez que je m'étais mis à traduire un livre, dont Mr. Henning a annoncé, il y a long tems, la traduction, comme étant déjà sous presse. Sachez, mon ami, qu'en fait des occupations littéraires, je n'aime pas à me rencontrer avec qui que ce soit. Au reste, j'ai la folle envie de bien traduire, et pour bien traduire Mr. de Voltaire, je sais qu'il se faudroit don-

ner au diable. C'est ce que je ne veux pas faire? C'est un bon mot que je viens de dire : trouvez-le admirable, je vous prie ; il n'est pas de moi. — Mais au fait. Vous vous attendez à des excuses, et les voilà. J'ai pris sans votre permission avec moi, ce que vous ne m'aviez prêté qu'en cachette. J'ai abusé de votre confiance ; j'en tombe d'accord. Mais est-ce ma faute, si contre ma curiosité ma bonne foi n'est pas la plus forte? En partant de Berlin, j'avois encore à lire quatre feuilles. Mettez-vous à ma place, avant que de prononcer contre moi. Mr. de Voltaire pourquoi n'est-il pas un Limiers ou un autre compilateur, les ouvrages desquels on peut finir partout, parceque ils nous ennuyent partout? Vous dites dans votre lettre : Mr. de Voltaire ne manquera pas de reconnaître ce service, qu'il attend de votre probité. Par ma foi, voilà autant pour le brodeur. Ce service est si mince, et je m'en glorifierai si peu, que Mr. de Voltaire sera assez reconnaissant, s'il veut bien avoir la bonté de l'oublier. Il vous a fait beaucoup de reproches que vous ne méritez pas? J'en suis au désespoir ; dites lui donc que nous sommes amis, et que ce n'est qu'un excès d'amitié qui vous a fait faire cette faute, si c'en est une de votre part. Voilà assez pour gagner les pardons d'un philosophe.

“ Je suis, &c.”

But as this ingenious and pithy answer did not arrive by the earliest post, the irascible philosopher condescended to write a second letter with his own hand, which did him still less honor than the first. For, although convinced of Richier's innocence, and certain that his book had not been stolen, and that Lessing had no intention of translating it, he nevertheless pretended to believe the former, and to fear the latter, in order to make a show of magnanimity, liberality, and tolerance ; and so, while he addresses the young German scholar

with expressions of exquisite courtesy and esteem, he does not forget to threaten him with his chamberlain's key and the hand of justice. This letter, which, even in its address,\* reveals the petty anxiety of the French philosopher, reads as follows : —

“On vous a déjà écrit, Monsieur, pour vous prier de rendre l'exemplaire qu'on m'a dérobé, et qu'on a remis entre vos mains. Je sais qu'il ne pouvoit être confié à un homme moins capable d'en abuser, et plus capable de le bien traduire. Mais comme j'ai depuis corrigé beaucoup cet ouvrage, et que j'y ai fait insérer plus de quarante cartons, vous me feriez un tort considérable de le traduire dans l'état, où vous l'avez. Vous m'en feriez un beaucoup plus grand encore de souffrir qu'on imprimât le livre en français. Vous ruineriez Mr. de Francheville, qui est un très-honnête homme, et qui est l'éditeur de cet ouvrage. Vous sentez qu'il seroit obligé de porter ses plaintes au public et aux magistrats de Saxe. Rien ne pourroit vous nuire davantage, et vous fermer irrévocablement le chemin de la fortune. Je serois très-affligé si la moindre négligence de votre part dans cette affaire mettoit Mr. de Francheville dans la cruelle nécessité de rendre ses plaintes publiques. Je vous prie, donc, Monsieur, de me renvoyer l'exemplaire qu'on vous a déjà redemandé en mon nom. C'est un vol, qu'on m'a fait. Vous avez trop de probité pour ne pas reparer le tort que j'essuie. Je serois très-satisfait, que non seulement vous traduisiez le livre en Allemand, mais que vous le fassiez paroître en Italien, ainsi que vous l'avez dit au précepteur des enfans de Mr. de Schulenburg. Je vous renverrai l'ouvrage entier, avec tous les cartons et tous les renseignements nécessaires,

\* It is as follows : —

“A Monsieur, —

Monsieur Lessing, Candidat en Médecine à Vittenberg ; et s'il n'est pas à Vittenberg, renvoyez à Leipzig, pour être remis à son père, Ministre du St. Evangile, à deux miles de Leipzig, qui saura sa demeure.”

et je récompenserai avec plaisir la bonne foi avec laquelle vous m'aurez rendu ce que je vous redemande. On sait malheureusement dans Berlin que c'est mon secrétaire Richier qui a fait ce vol. (!) Je ferai ce que je pourrai pour ne pas perdre le coupable ; et je lui pardonnerai même, en faveur de la restitution que j'attends de vous. Ayez la bonté de me faire tenir le paquet par les chariots de poste, et comptez sur ma reconnaissance, étant entièrement à vous,

“VOLTAIRE,

“Chambellan du Roi.”

This letter, in which Lessing saw his innocent friend treated as a common thief, and himself, between the lines, accused as his confederate, notwithstanding all the flatteries interspersed, enraged him to such a degree, that he threw aside all reserve, and upbraided the lauded defender of innocence,\* for his unworthy conduct, in the strongest terms, in a letter written in Latin, now unfortunately lost, and of which he afterwards said to Richier, “Voltaire will have scarcely stuck this letter up in the shop-windows.” To a man of scrupulous honor, like Lessing, this whole occurrence, though brought about at first by a slight negligence on his own part, must have been extremely offensive. His reputation had been affected by it, for the story was variously told on the street, and it was even rumored that he had left Berlin from fear of Voltaire's indignation. His friend Mylius wrote to him at Wittenberg, “Your affair with Voltaire has attracted much attention here. You have become better known since your departure than you were during your stay.”

Even Frederic the Great appears to have received a version of the occurrence unfavorable to Lessing ; and we shall see hereafter that this circumstance contributed to

frustrate all efforts of the latter to gain firm footing at Berlin. But it is also a significant fact, in view of his subsequent conduct towards Voltaire, that the great adversary who was to pluck in pieces so mercilessly, before the eyes of the astounded world, the laurel crown of heroic tragedy, which had been awarded to the French poet, came, for the first and last time, into personal contact with the celebrated author, in the manner above described, and thereby conceived a "peculiar loathing" for the moral character of the man, before whose genius as a writer, a whole century, with Frederic the Great at its head, bent the knee in homage. Early impressions, like those which Lessing had received on this occasion, are not easily forgotten; and the almost cruelly haughty manner in which his wit, twelve years afterwards, sported with the idol of the eighteenth century,—that Lessing-wit which, according to Heine's expression, "plays with the mouse before strangling it,"—was not called forth wholly, as Gervinus supposes, by Voltaire's poetical and critical arrogance. Rather, the aversion which infused into Lessing's critique such keenness of derision, originated in his antipathy to the mean character of the man, of which he had received good proof, and from the consequences of which he had suffered bitterly in his youth.

For his friend Richier, however, the misfortune brought upon him by Voltaire proved to be a blessing. Prince Henry of Prussia took him into his service, in which as librarian and counsellor, he survived Lessing several years. In 1768 we still find him in close association with Lessing's most intimate friends Nicolai and Mendelssohn. He was an amiable man, and so *very* French,

that, in spite of the evil treatment which he had experienced from Voltaire, he was much dissatisfied with Lessing's subsequent attacks on him in the Hamburg Dramaturgy. He was also wont to speak of the great *littérateur* of his nation with respect and devotion, and even to excuse his own personal wrongs by pleading the passionate temper of the poet. But Nemesis overtook Voltaire soon after, when at Frankfort he was charged with a similar offence, and suffered a punishment which he would doubtless have visited in greater measure upon the innocent Lessing, if the power of a Frederic the Great had been at the disposal of his suspicious rage.\*

\* See Varnhagen's masterly representation of this episode in the Berlin Geneal. Kalender for 1837. Reprinted in his *Denkwürdigkeiten und Vermischte Schriften*, Th. VIII. 172-284.

## CHAPTER V.

## LESSING AT WITTENBERG.

DECEMBER, 1751, TO NOVEMBER, 1752.

**H**ITHERTO Lessing had exercised himself at Leipsic exclusively in the province of poetical, and at Berlin in that of æsthetical, study and composition. There the dramatist, and here the elegant prose writer, had formed his school, and in both departments, notwithstanding his youth, had already excelled his German contemporaries. At Wittenberg, whither the necessity of earnest studies called him, we see the man of three and twenty penetrate "into the innermost sanctuary of book-worm erudition," and vanquish a German scholar in a field where the latter then stood præëminent.

At the university Lessing found his second brother, who was studying theology there, and also a former schoolfellow of Meissen, F. J. Schwarz, a young and learned theologian, who at that time was employed in the library at Wittenberg, and afterwards became professor of theology at Leipsic. Lessing, still in needy circumstances, shared his brother's room, and received from his early friend the great favor of the use of the library, which he employed so well that he was afterwards accustomed to boast that there was not a book in it which he had not had in his hands.

After the recent galling drudgery of writing for the



demands of the day, he enjoyed with all the more comfort the short leisure of a year spent in quiet study, designed to renew and reënforce the stock of knowledge so largely disbursed at Berlin.

With respect to the subjects of these studies, which were divided between the history of learned men and classical philology, we meet here again that characteristic peculiarity of Lessing, in accordance with which, he, whose mind was constantly directed to a general view of human life, always connected his pursuits with the place and surroundings of his residence. Thus his sojourn at an almost exclusively theological university, which had been also the cradle of the Reformation, revived in him, the son of a learned theologian, and descendant of a participator in the religious movements of the sixteenth century, his early interest in the history of the Reformation and the Reformers. This interest harmonized with his love for the history of learned men which the study of Bayle had cultivated. He subjected Jöcher's Dictionary of Learned Men, which, in this department, held the first place in Germany at that time, to a criticism which he intended to elaborate into an independent work, but abandoned the enterprise, although several forms had already been printed, on receiving a request from Jöcher to give over to him the collected material for the correction and completion of his own work. The regard which the learned professor and doctor of theology showed towards the young scholar, who had attacked him very sharply, proves with what respect Lessing had already inspired the most prominent members of the literary society of Germany.

The fruits of his researches into the history of the

Reformation appear in those treatises which he called "Rettungen" (Rescues). Danzel, who in general has established by striking analogies the spiritual affinity between Lessing and Bayle, justly finds in this title an expression of Bayle's fundamental thought. The tendency in both is an endeavor to review the errors, misunderstandings, and injustices of distinguished men, in order to improve, correct, and defend them for the furtherance of truth and right. At the same time there is exhibited in these "Rettungen" an element of noble humanity, which makes their perusal interesting even at the present day, although we care nothing for the men referred to, such as Cochläus, Lemnius, and Cardanus. The great principles of tolerance and humanity, and the warm love with which the generous defender protects the characters of those now forgotten authors, — these still appeal to our hearts. Who, excepting the few scholars whose special studies have led them in this direction, is nowadays acquainted with the writings of the celebrated naturalist and mathematician of Milan, Jerome Cardanus, whom Lessing, in one of these "Rettungen," defends against the charge of atheism? But who is not interested in tracing Lessing's first impulse towards the idea of his "Nathan the Wise," and the fundamental principle of his "Education of the Human Race," to this extraordinary man, of whose autobiography, written with Rousseau-like frankness, he exclaims in admiration, "Would that every great man might write such a work with equal candor"? For the essential part of the accusation against Cardanus lay in the fact that this liberal thinker had ventured to intimate that notwithstanding the superior claims of the Christian religion, other

religions were not to be absolutely rejected, as containing no portion of truth. To be sure, the boldness with which, twenty-five years later, the author of *Nathan* made the cause of Cardanus wholly his own, is wanting, as yet, in the youth of twenty-two, who, moreover, was restrained in the public expression of his liberal views by considerations of filial piety. The "*Rettung*" of Lemnius also possesses almost the interest of a novel, although, were it not for Lessing, no one would now know anything about this Wittenberg poet, and his unjust persecution by the great Reformer. But the motive which impelled Lessing to write it was a still higher one than the rescue of an endangered literary fame; it was a sense of right, which does not hesitate to defend a vilified character even against the highest authorities, which declares flight from unjust judges to be a duty of self-preservation, and proves, by the example of Luther, "how deeply passion and revenge can degrade even the most honest and saintly men." Veneration for the greatness and energy of Luther, but war against the intolerance and popish tyranny of Lutheranism, — such is the spirit of this work. For every religion and sect which ignored the principle of tolerance was in his eyes a papacy, and the Lutheran papacy he found very strongly represented in the Wittenberg of his time. A Wittenberg professor had sent a copy of his works to Pope Benedict XIV., and received in return a very flattering letter of acknowledgment from the secretary of state, Cardinal Valenti. Reason enough for the zealots of Wittenberg to cry *heresy*, and preach on the subject in the cathedral, saying, "Luther's ashes must move in his grave at the outrage that a Wittenberg professor has dared to write to Rome, to the

pope, the great Babylonian harlot; " \* reason enough also for Lessing to deride these Lutheran fanatics in the epigram, —

"The man has praised the pope — the pope ! and we, in Luther's name,

Condemn his fault, and sentence all his words and works to shame ;

But if, instead of this old pope, the man had praised the devil,  
We should have sat us down in peace, nor recognized the evil !"

Lessing's attitude towards Luther at this time is so characteristic that we must consider it for a moment.

Nothing was farther from his purpose, he says, in the letters written immediately after those " Rettungen," than to disparage one of the greatest men the world has ever seen. " Luther," he adds, " is regarded by me with such veneration, that, all things considered, I am well pleased to have detected some faults in him, because, otherwise, I was in danger of deifying him. The traces of human weakness that I find in his character are as precious to me as the most brilliant of his perfections ; they are, indeed, more instructive than all the latter combined." For it is precisely on account of his errors that he is praised by those theologians whose covetousness, envy, and ambition reveal only too plainly " that at the bottom of their hearts they are anything but contented with Luther, and curse him secretly, because he has made himself so great at the expense of his colleagues, because he has shifted the power and wealth of the church into the hands of the rulers, and surrendered the ecclesiastical order to the secular class, after the latter had been for many centuries the slave of the former."

\* Danzel, Gottsched und seine Zeit. 312.

It is probable that Goethe had these words in mind when he embodied their meaning in the plaintive verse wherein a Lutheran ecclesiastic says, —

“From our poor bread the saintly man  
Scrapes butter off till none is left :  
May God forgive him for the theft ;  
And *we too — if we can !*”

And not only Lutheranism, but Christianity as a whole, he wishes to subject to a free examination. “What is more necessary than to be convinced of one’s belief ? and what is more impossible than conviction without previous investigation ? Let it not be alleged that the examination of one’s own religion is sufficient ; that it is not necessary to seek in other religions the marks of divinity when they have already been discovered in the accepted form. Let it not be said that if the right way has already been found, there is no need of taking trouble about the wrong ways. These are not learned by that, but that by these.” With all his devotion to the faith of his childhood, the main features of Lessing’s subsequent free mode of thinking are, nevertheless, to be clearly traced at this period ; and the separation of religion and philosophy into two distinct provinces, which he afterwards illustrated in his own writings, is already foreshadowed in this stage of his progress.

Besides these labors, Lessing resumed the study of the ancients, especially of the Roman poets, more zealously than it had been possible for him to do at Berlin. Familiarity with the writings of the Roman epigrammatist Martial stimulated him to original production in this species of poetry ; and thus arose the greater part of his

epigrams, which are by no means mere imitations of older originals, but were called forth, in great part, by the life which surrounded him. One of this kind we have just quoted ; and we are told that at that time every occurrence was transformed by him into an epigram, and that occasionally he made himself their subject. We can also readily believe his statement that he had to suffer from personal applications of their point even when there was no foundation in fact for the charges. Gervinus very unjustly depreciates the merit of Lessing's productions in this field. Danzel is more appreciative. He declares Lessing to be the first who, in Germany, made wit, and a sharp, comical point, the distinguishing features of the epigram. And however severely Lessing himself disparaged his epigrams, — he did so, indeed, with all of his writings after they were completed, — still it is grossly unjust to overlook, as Gervinus does, the excellent skill of so many specimens, on account of occasional insipidities in the witticisms of Thrax and Stax. We will say nothing of the numerous epigrams about women, in which the then much neglected sex, with its coquetry and sensuousness, its vanity and janty slatternliness, is, for the most part, hardly dealt with ; and marriage appears almost throughout only in the light of a comical mishap. But the reproach that this treatment of the sex on the part of a man still so young amounts only to conventional prejudice and borrowed mannerism, is far from being correct ; for Lessing allowed these epigrams to remain, and even added to them when he republished them eighteen years afterwards ; and if, for a long time, he was regarded by his most intimate friends as a misogynist and scorner of women, there was at least a good

reason for this, in the want of culture then characteristic of the sex of whom he wrote as late as 1770 to his Eva König: "Many women are good because they do not know how to go to work in order to be bad." Indeed, these epigrams are almost uniformly of a satirical kind, and we have seen in the episode of Lessing's collision with Voltaire, how scathingly he knew how to wield a weapon of this nature; yet there are not wanting specimens in which the point is a beautiful and genial thought, without any touch of satire. Of such is the wonderful epigram entitled

"BENEFITS.

"A bad man, like a leaky tub, may waste his helps to right;  
Yet largely pour thy generous gifts — *how soon a crack soaks tight!*"

It will be seen hereafter how Lessing brought his efforts in this style of poetry to a conclusion in that famous treatise on the epigram which Herder calls an epigram itself.

After Martial, the study of Horace engaged his attention at Wittenberg. The "Rettungen" of Horace, similar to the preceding in tendency and spirit, but far superior to them in ingeniousness and breadth of thought, gave expression to his affectionate admiration and penetrating understanding of this "philosophical poet" who, as he describes him, knew how to bring wit and reason into more than sisterly union, and with the elegance of a courtier, to give to the earnest lessons of wisdom the pliant nature of friendly admonitions, while he lent to them entrancing forms, the better to secure their entrance into the human heart. His defence of Horace against

the accusations of disgusting sensuality, unmanly cowardice, and flippant irreverence, furnishes an occasion to express his opinion concerning the nature of poetic creativeness in general, and to affirm the important proposition that the true poet always stands essentially above his creations, and that in Horace this free elevation above the earnestness of life is not a proof of want of earnestness — that it is rather a conscious trait of cheerful self-irony.

These studies of Horace, however, led to an occurrence which impelled Lessing to come forth in a manner that at one stroke raised him to the most dreaded polemic of his time, and made his name known throughout all Germany. A certain mediocre poet of the circle of Gleim, praised far beyond his merit, and characterized as "the German Horace," namely, Pastor Lange, of Laublingen, near Halle, had published a bad translation of the Odes of the Roman poet, whom the vain man seemed to regard as his special property. The book was dedicated to the great King of Prussia, and was graciously received by him, and, moreover, had been extravagantly praised by the friends of the translator, even by Hagedorn, as the first tasteful Germanizing of the favorite Roman poet. Only Lessing, who, as a student at Leipsic, had shown great interest in the (for us utterly unendurable) original poems of Lange, found in this translation, on which the author claimed that he had labored nine years, the most bungling school-boy's work, and did not hesitate to express this opinion publicly, and to corroborate it by proofs. Lange attempted a defence, which only stimulated Lessing to attack him still more severely. To crown the misfortune of the unlucky



pastor, Lessing's disposition towards him was sharpened by an intervening incident. Some well-meaning but blundering friend, wishing to save Lange from utter overthrow, intimated to him that Lessing was capable of being bought off in his criticism; and Lange was so imprudent as to express this suspicion as a fact, in a public journal. Such an attack upon his moral character could not but excite in Lessing the keenest indignation. Twice before, in his controversies with Voltaire and with Jöcher, his reputation had been assailed in like manner, though not openly. The poetical pastor of Laublingen was the first who ventured publicly to represent him as a kind of literary freebooter. Lessing resolved to make an example of him, and the punishment was terrible. The "Vademecum for Samuel Gottlob Lange" helped, indeed, to give the name of the unfortunate translator of Horace an unenviable immortality, but it utterly annihilated him as an author in the opinion of his contemporaries. The Vademecum was Lessing's first independent critical essay. It was directed against a man counted by that age among its greatest poets, and one of the first authorities in matters of taste and culture, and against a production, which, hitherto, no one had dared to mention except in praise. The success was extraordinary. Such a man as Michaelis wrote, in the Göttingen Literary Advertiser (*Gelehrte Anzeigen*), that this essay of Lessing, or, as he describes it, "this emphatic, and yet not uncourteous satire, full of erudition, and rich in art," will remain long after Lange's labors shall have been forgotten. All the learned journals took sides with Lessing. The relentless severity, the annihilating derision, the sovereign contempt, with which Lessing treats his opponent in this

criticism, are due to his just indignation at the attacks made upon his moral dignity. Had it not been for this provocation, he would, perhaps, have spared his adversary this second castigation, or would, at least, have administered it more mildly. That he divided his epistle from the beginning into heads, after the model of a sermon, is an excellent stroke of humorous irony; and when, at the conclusion of his polemic, he recapitulates with the words, "I have shown you that you possess neither language nor criticism, neither antiquities nor history, neither knowledge of the earth nor of heaven, in short, that you have not one of the qualities necessary for a translator of Horace," we may add, that Lessing at the same time pronounced sentence of superficiality and nothingness on the whole activity of the Halle school of poets, to which Lange belonged, and whose æsthetical oracle was the Halle Professor Meier.\* As regards the title "Vademecum," Lessing gave it to his treatise because the arrogant Lange had seen fit to apply this epithet to the small duodecimo form in which Lessing's writings had appeared.

However, neither the Vademecum nor the other works which belong to the period of Lessing's life hitherto considered, are to be classed among those grand productions to which he subsequently owed the name of "the first critic in Europe." On the whole, he stands, thus far, as Danzel observes, on the ground of negative criticism, of which the aim and interest are formally correct thinking. "He makes here, as it were, a first trial in the handling of the weapons of wit, acuteness, and close logic, with which he was afterwards to wage victo-

\* Danzel, I. 252.

rious battles of genius in the service of productive criticism."

Meanwhile, Lessing's sojourn at Wittenberg came to an end. He had already, on the twenty-ninth of April, 1752, by graduation, exchanged his title of student of medicine for that of master of the liberal arts.

To remain longer, and prepare himself for an academical career, he lacked desire as well as money. Besides, he had worked severely, without the least intermission, for nearly a whole year; and it was no wonder that now his vivacious disposition, and inclination for greater and broader relations in life, drew him back to Berlin. He left, therefore, the melancholy Wittenberg towards the close of the year 1752, and, without heeding the dissuasions of his parents, returned to the Prussian capital.

GOTTHOLD EPHRAIM LESSING.

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BOOK THIRD.

THE PERIOD OF EARLY MATURITY—BERLIN  
AND LEIPSIC.

1758 — 1760.

( 125 )



## CHAPTER I.

NICOLAI AND MENDELSSOHN.

THE next three years which Lessing passed in Berlin were rich in the most important results for his development. During their course he won a firm position in the literary world, and formed connections with men who, in their various departments, were obtaining an historical importance for the intellectual life of North Germany, and whose friendship was to accompany him through his whole life. His relations towards his own family, also, were gradually becoming more pleasant, since the conviction forced itself by degrees upon his father, that this son, whose writings not only found a place on the centre-tables of ladies of quality, but also received commendation from illustrious university scholars and theologians, such as Michaelis, could no longer be regarded as a prodigal. Besides, Lessing's industry procured him the means not only of supporting himself decently without burdening his parents, but even of affording them very welcome relief in the shape of pecuniary aid to his brothers. To be sure, the family did not comprehend the far-reaching aims of their extraordinarily gifted member ; but they became gradually reconciled to his proceedings, especially as he did not fail in respectful attentions towards his father, whom he liberally provided with newspapers and journals, books

and literary news, not forgetting a copy of the first volumes of his own collected writings, which the father received with satisfaction.

This reconciliation, and also his position in the eyes of the public, had been greatly strengthened by the manner in which Lessing (through his preface to the works of Mylius) had separated himself decisively from that immoral and unprincipled class of literati, of which Mylius, who had, meantime, lost his life in the scientific journey before alluded to, was, in many respects, rightly regarded as the representative.

A literary life such as Lessing had hitherto led, and now continued to lead in Berlin, is like war, which must support war. With the single exception of the years at Breslau, he never could free himself from the necessity of purchasing the scanty leisure wherein all his great works were produced, by labors in which the consideration of gain was the principal motive. And during these three years of his second sojourn at Berlin, much of his activity was expended in securing a mere subsistence. It was for this purpose that he resumed the writing of critical *feuilletons* for the Berlin newspaper before mentioned, as well as the preparing of translations of works from the French, English, and Spanish literatures, by which labor he first acquired, in part, a knowledge of these languages. Still his translations were incomparably better than any that had thus far appeared in Germany, and his choice of subjects was never governed by the chances of profit to himself, but by the real interests of science. His literary activity during this time was immense. Besides his labors in translation, which, among other works, brought into notice Marigny's History of

the Arabs, and the Spaniard Huarte's work on the examination of what geniuses are adapted to the sciences,\* there appeared, also, the first six volumes of his own collected writings, and the first three numbers of "The Theatrical Library," which was not concluded with the fourth number until 1758. With all this he supervised the publication of the writings of his friend Mylius; composed, in connection with Mendelssohn, the essay "On Pope, as a Metaphysician," which was, properly, a satire on the Berlin Academy; pursued studies from Spanish sources with reference to the continuation of Marigny's History of the Arabs; and labored at a new translation of the then celebrated work, "The Magic World," by the Dutchman Balthasar Becker,† that bold adversary of belief in witchcraft and magic, who was so cruelly abused by the theologians and jurists of his time. Lessing wished, in connection with this translation, to give an historical delineation of all the controversies to which the book had given rise. To this end he had already, at Wittenberg, collected the writings referring to the subject, and was now seeking the acquaintance of foreign scholars, who aided him by contributions. In this matter, also, his principal desire was the furtherance of intellectual and moral freedom, and in the same cause he was attracted to a renewed study of Cardanus, and the Italian free-thinkers Giordano Bruno and Thomas Campanella, from whose works he prepared important extracts, with annotations of his

\* Lessing's translation is entitled "*Die Prüfung der Köpfe*;" and the same work has been published in English, under the title of "The Trial of Wits." — TRANS.

† Died 1698.



own. Finally, he contemplated the founding of several journals, of which, however, only one appeared, under the title "The Best out of Bad Books," and of this only one number.

Notwithstanding these extended literary labors, Lessing still found time for social intercourse with his numerous friends; which was the more gratifying, because his whole nature was formed for active communication, and endowed in a high degree for varied and animated conversation. Thus we find in his circle the skilful engraver William Meil, the actor Brückner, the musician Kirnberger, the learned Jewish physician Gumpertz, and the accomplished and keen-witted Frenchman Prémontval, who showed a fine susceptibility in the cultivation of German literature and philosophy. We also see him enter into association with Ramler, the critical and poetic *bel esprit*, and with Sulzer, the æsthetic philosopher of Berlin, who, in virtue of his eight years' seniority to Lessing, assumed towards him an attitude corresponding to that of Herder towards Goethe. To all these is added a university acquaintance of Leipsic — "the little Bauzner," Neumann, who, for some time, even shared Lessing's apartment. He was also, in his own way, a literate and poet, and composed an heroic poem, "Nimrod," in twenty-four books, of which Lessing wrote a very comical notice.\* In other respects Neumann was a good-natured fellow, who was less witty himself than "the cause of wit in others," and who did not lay it to heart

\* Among other things he says, "The poet has given full rein to his wit, and not troubled himself with rhymes, but has selected *hexameters without feet*, to which, however, he has not tied himself down so closely as not to permit octameters and pentameters to slip in frequently."

when Lessing, referring to a treatise of his on "Understanding and Fortune," greeted him with the words, "Man, how dost thou presume to write about two things which thou hast never possessed!"

More important, however, was the union which Lessing formed with Nicolai and Mendelssohn. Frederic Nicolai, a native of Berlin, was only twenty years of age when Lessing returned to that city from Wittenberg; Mendelssohn was of the same age as Lessing. Nicolai had learned the book trade, and thereby had obtained, through industrious reading and study, an extraordinary self-acquired culture. Already, in the nineteenth year of his age, he had successfully attacked Gottsched, in an anonymous article, wherein, with the aid of an English essay on the same subject, he defended Milton from the charge of plagiarism. Still greater attention was excited by his "Letters on the Present Condition of Polite Learning in Germany" (likewise published anonymously), in which he attempted to show the onesidedness of both of the great conflicting parties of Gottsched and the Swiss, and pointed to the necessity of a severe fundamental criticism for the prosperity of German poetical production. Lessing, who read these letters while yet in press, was the more drawn towards their author, because he could not help regarding him as in some sort his own pupil. And indeed Nicolai had thoroughly schooled himself in Lessing's critical notices and letters, and had unconsciously imitated his master's style and manner to such a degree that many literati—Sulzer, for instance—at first regarded the treatise of Nicolai as a work of Lessing, just as Lachmann also has incorporated in his edition of Lessing's works an article of

Nicolai "On the English Stage."\* Still more direct was Lessing's influence on the second friend, whom he won during this renewed sojourn at Berlin, and with whom, even more than with Nicolai, he remained in the closest union to the end of his days — Moses Mendelssohn, whose taste for literature received its direction and cultivation through this union. Mendelssohn, the son of a poor Jewish schoolmaster of Dessau, had come, when only sixteen years of age, to Berlin, where, in great poverty and under incredible privations and obstacles of every kind, he had devoted himself to philosophical and mathematical studies, and obtained, besides, not only a knowledge of Latin, but also of the German language and literature. He was employed as factor in the commercial house of a wealthy Jewish silk manufacturer, in whose family he had formerly been private tutor. A friend of Lessing, the before-mentioned Dr. Gumpertz, — a man of many-sided culture, afterwards secretary to the Marquis d'Argens, — took advantage of Lessing's love of chess to obtain for the reserved Mendelssohn, who was an excellent chess-player, an acquaintance with the former, who very soon discovered in him a man of superior endowments. Lessing published in his Theatrical Library an article written by Mendelssohn, defending his nation against an observation made by Michaelis, in his criticism of Lessing's drama, "The Jews," and sent the number to Michaelis with a letter, in which he gave a highly honorable account of the author, in whom he thought he saw "another Spinoza, but without Spinoza's errors." In the same manner he published, without Mendelssohn's knowledge, his first work, the "Philo-

\* Danzel, I. 281.

sophical Letters," and how powerful must have been Lessing's influence in their composition, both as to form and contents, is best seen from the fact that even so fine a critic and earnest admirer of Lessing as Michaelis could consider these anonymous productions as Lessing's own creation.

Through Lessing, Mendelssohn subsequently became acquainted with Nicolai, and soon a close union was formed between these three young men, who, at that time, resided very near each other. Mendelssohn was accustomed to visit Lessing in his room, by St. Nicholas's churchyard, regularly, from seven to nine in the morning, before going to his business, and to discuss literary and philosophical subjects with him. It was especially the interest in English literature, so strong and radical in its influence on Nicolai and Mendelssohn, that united Lessing with both, and soon incited them to a common activity. Lessing, together with Mendelssohn, wrote the treatise, "Pope as a Metaphysician,"\* by which, in reality, an absurd prize-theme of the Berlin Academy, which regarded the poet as a systematic philosopher, was derided. Although this treatise may not have attracted the degree of attention which the authors expected, yet the Academy felt the thrust very perceptibly, and Lessing now began to excite in the higher world of scholars a regard mingled with fear. Beausobre, in a letter to Gottsched, called him *un écrivain mordant*, to whom "some lessons" must be given; and another academician, Sulzer, expressed his displeasure, likewise, in confidential letters to friends. He wrote to Bodmer, "Lessing is a medley of good and bad, and not yet at

\* Compare Hettner, *Literaturgeschichte des 18 Jahrhunderts*, I. 239.

the turning-point. He can become wholly good, or wholly bad. He is much more eloquent in speech than skilful in writing, and he seems to me to possess much understanding. But he is still very young, and a number of older and younger smatterers are laboring to spoil him. I cannot get at him, for it seems as though he feared I might differ from him in opinion if we were to enter into any discussion." Lessing, and fear! One is astounded in reading these utterances of academical arrogance, which obviously looks down with contempt upon Lessing's intercourse with actors, Jews, and unscholarly literati like Brückner, Mendelssohn, and Nicolai, all persons whom the pedantry of the corporate erudition of that day rated much lower than does the corresponding body of this day, and whom, precisely on that account, Lessing selected for his most intimate associates. Moreover, Lessing appears in Sulzer's eyes as already the head of a school of his own, a Berlin literary party; and indeed nothing would have been easier than to make himself such a party-chief, had he not been preserved from that ambition by his free, independent spirit, to which everything in the shape of a clique or sect was his life-long abhorrence. On the other hand, the influence over others, to which he had now attained, only incited him the more to develop himself freely in union with, as well as in opposition to, them.\*

In general, this second residence in Berlin formed a successful and cheerful period in Lessing's life. The first important results of his labors as an author—his recognition by the best of his contemporaries, his

\* Danzel, I. 275.

friendship and personal intercourse with young energetic men and talented women, and the intellectual stimulus proceeding therefrom, united with that first fresh breath of spring which began to quicken the spiritual life of the nation and its literature — all this combined with youth and youthful courage, with the sense of power and health, and with the joyful consciousness of having pursued the right way, in spite of all obstacles, and of having a limitless future before him.

An evidence of this happy mood is found in the plan of a burlesque heroic poem, which he projected in connection with Nicolai, to whom he left its execution in doggerel. It was a satire against Gottsched and his persecution of Klopstock's poetry. Gottsched was represented as a literary Don Quixote, who, in the character of a knight-errant, with his poetic vassal and protégé, Schönaich, as shield-bearer, traversed Germany for the purpose of annihilating the enemies of true poesy in the form of the seraphs and angels whom Klopstock had brought into the world. In this enterprise there was no lack of ridiculous adventures, which were to be humorously illustrated by the drawings of Lessing's friends Meil and Breitenbauch. This delightful sketch may be read in a note by Nicolai to the first letter of Mendelssohn to Lessing.

The love for English literature, which formed a strong bond of attraction between the three friends, had, meanwhile, stimulated Lessing to a dramatic creation, for the production of which the dissipating life of Berlin did not grant him sufficient repose. It was the burgher tragedy of "Miss Sara Sampson," for the

elaboration of which he retired in midwinter, early in the year 1755, to Potsdam, where he remained eight weeks in the solitude of a summer-house. But before we turn to the consideration of this, the most important dramatic work belonging to the period of his youth, we must take a survey of Lessing's earlier dramas.

## CHAPTER II.

## JUVENILE DRAMAS.

THE seven juvenile dramas of Lessing, of which, however, he utterly rejected two (the comedies "Damon," and "The Old Maid"), a few years after their composition, and excluded them from the compilation of his writings, belong to the first period of his life at Leipsic, and to the influences surrounding him then and there. These comedies, which were at first received on the stage, as well as by the critics, with great applause, had already become obsolete at the end of Lessing's life, and had almost disappeared from the theatre; so that, whilst the dramatic works of his maturer years, his "Minna von Barnhelm," "Emilia Gallotti," and "Nathan the Wise," are still regarded as ornaments of our stage, and treasures of our literature, those juvenile productions have passed into oblivion, from whence they were first drawn forth by the literary historian, to whom we owe the important insight into the relation of young Lessing to his predecessor Gottsched. It has been shown by Danzel, with convincing thoroughness, that Lessing himself did not realize this connection, and was by no means willing to acknowledge that the whole dramatic activity of this period rested on a foundation which the Leipsic Coryphæus of the then-existing German literature, whom Lessing had often



bitterly, and not always justly, assailed, had prepared with as much labor as merit. Gottsched had the courage to extend his reform, which was based on the principle of the cultivation of literature according to fixed rules, to the thoroughly barbarized province of the theatre, and dramatic poetry; and he succeeded in raising them both, through propriety of creation and arrangement, to a position where the stage could be regarded as an expression of the culture of the time, and claim the sympathy of good society.

The means employed was the transplanting to German soil of the French form of art, especially the tragedy, which he had studied closely for this purpose. To the same end, his celebrated wife, Victoria Gottsched, *née* Kulmur, a native of Dantzic, had devoted herself to the cultivation of the comedy. She translated into prose Molière's *Misanthrope*, introduced upon the stage the *Poetical Village-Younger of Destouches*, and constructed three original comedies partly on plans borrowed from the naturalistic Dane, Baron Holberg.\* However crude and prosaic were these pieces by Madame Gottsched, yet the productions of her pupils and successors, Mylius, Krüger, Gellert, Schlegel, and the rest, were vastly inferior. The portrayal of vulgar reality, wherein the comic side is represented by brutal vileness, and the moral is expressed in satire, is the substance of these efforts; and their style may be imagined by that of the two dramas rejected by Lessing from his own works.

From such a soil sprang Lessing's first dramatic attempts. Their form is that introduced by Gottsched

\* Prutz, Holberg, 131, 222.

from the French; the unities of time and place are scrupulously observed; the principal characters are shadowy abstractions, without individuality or national coloring; the rest of the *personæ* are, likewise, more or less conventional types and masks. Even their names—Damon, Valer, Adrast, Theophan, &c.—are, in accordance with French usage, borrowed from antiquity; and it showed an extraordinary progress and strength of originality when Lessing introduced modern names and natural occurrences into the drama. Yet from the first there existed an important distinction between Lessing and his predecessors. With Gottsched the drama had been only the means of promoting a principle; with Madame Gottsched, only a vehicle for moral instruction. The former had written tragedies, and the latter comedies, without any poetic impulse, and solely, as it were, to further the symmetrical development of German literature. Lessing, however, composed his dramas under the guidance of intellectual inspiration; and he wrote them with direct reference to the stage, and for the actors, from whom, on his part, he was always eager to learn. His juvenile efforts had been stimulated by the study of the Roman comic poets, especially Plautus, and the terse wit and lively dialogue of this poet had influenced his style, while he soon perceived that the action, the life-like and well-founded course of the event which forms the “fable,” is the essential thing in the drama. In all these respects, these now-forgotten plays stand high above the works of all his German predecessors and contemporaries; while they contained a still greater excellence in the fact that he endeavored, especially in “The Young

Scholar" and in "The Free-thinker," to embody his own outer and inner experience, and to introduce the most important questions of life and science. He stood on the same level with Gottsched and his school only as regards his adoption of the French models; for he adhered to that form of art, even when his material was borrowed from ancient comedies, or the English Drama.\* But already his favorite French author, Marivaux, from whom in his very first piece — The Young Scholar — he borrowed the figure of Lisette, the standing type of the intriguing, pert, and shrewd chambermaid, was, in the eyes of Gottsched and his disciples, a revolutionist; and Lessing, in imitating his manner, was to them a Herostratus,† towards the wonderful structure of the old classic French comedy.

We have already seen how Lessing, in the Young Scholar, made use of his own experience of life. Also in the Free-thinker he incorporated his most earnest meditation and his practical knowledge; for we have before observed how closely the material herein elaborated touched him personally. The plot of this piece is briefly as follows: The free-thinker, Adrast, regards all clergymen as knaves and hypocrites. He has been helped to this conclusion by some unfortunate transactions with that class, into the narration of which Lessing has woven events concerning his own family. From this state of mind he is to be converted; and it is Theophan, a pious young clergyman, but at the same time a morally honorable and tolerant character, who,

\* All this is developed and established by Danzel, I. 130–162.

† The incendiary who set fire to the famous Temple of Diana at Ephesus, in order to immortalize his name. — TRANS.

by his consistent conduct, brings the free-thinker to confess that he has committed a great wrong in asserting that orthodox piety educates only hypocrites and knaves, even in the clergy. The servants of both the principal characters are portrayed each as the caricature of his master. John, the servant of Adrast, is a vulgar rascal, who makes a practical use of his master's free-thinking enlightenment, by deducing therefrom doctrines of the vilest selfishness : he pretends to believe neither in God nor the devil, and yet, in the midst of his atheistic boasting, is brought back to a belief in both by a joke of Lisette. Martin, the servant of Theophan, on the contrary, is a representative of those stupid denunciators who, sometimes in the character of clergymen, are fanatically zealous against all enlightenment and free thought. The whole concludes with a double marriage ; and the fundamental idea is not, as Danzel supposes, the enforcement of the command, "Love your enemies," but the development of the proposition, "By their fruits ye shall know them."

In this composition the youthful Lessing fulfilled an early promise made to his father, and the worthy pastor primarius must have read this comedy at least with considerable satisfaction.

With the exception of occasional didactic prolixity, the dialogue is very lively, and the delineation of the two servants in the fifth scene of the second act reveals a power of witty characterization which might excite the envy of many a comic poet of our day. And at the same time this drama is a forerunner of the most finished productions of Lessing's mature genius, since in its story, as well as in that of *Minna von Barnhelm*,

the subject of treatment is the praise of the good and honorable traits of a particular class, rather than the indiscriminate derision of its faults and weaknesses, which had hitherto been the unvarying custom of comedy.

But whilst Lessing, in these two pieces, collects his material from the manners of his time and the experiences of his own life, the third composition, "The Misogynist" (afterwards considerably altered by him) is purely a result of the stimulus afforded by Roman and Greek poets, united with an episode borrowed from the French. A woman-hating father will not allow his son Valerius to marry the beautiful Hilaria. She disguises herself as a man, and is thus, as her own brother Lelio, introduced into the house of the misogynist, whom she succeeds in charming so completely that he finally gives his consent to the marriage of his son. Parallel to this intrigue runs a second, in which the daughter of the misogynist, Laura, is united to her lover, Leander, by the stratagem of an old lawyer, who persuades the father that he will be causing the ruin of Leander by consenting to the union, since the youth has pledged himself to abandon a suit which he has with the misogynist, on condition that he receives the hand of the daughter. A ludicrous episode is the falling in love of Laura with the pseudo-Lelio; which, however, exceeds the bounds of probability in making her willing even to renounce her betrothed for his sake.

"The Jews" is purely a drama for the times, written for a moral purpose, namely, to combat the prejudice against this oppressed people, which prejudice was then prevailing in all its strength, even in the realm of Fred-

eric the Great. In this respect this work, in which a rich and cultivated Jew gives an example of the most magnanimous love of enemies, is the worthy herald of Nathan the Wise. Lessing, who, in his dramatic labors, generally had moral ends in view, and endeavored to make the stage the pulpit of philanthropy, had a good opportunity in Berlin to perceive the contempt with which custom and law persecuted the people to which belonged two of his most intimate friends, Mendelssohn and Gumpertz, the latter of whom, according to Mendelssohn, was the original of his principal character, the Jew. Michaelis, in his criticism, censured the piece from an æsthetical point of view. He justly regarded the person and procedure of the Jew as not sufficiently accounted for, the design as too arbitrary, and the action as too improbable. But it was a bold thought of the youthful Lessing to oppose so publicly a prejudice which enslaved even a philosophical king like Frederic, and which, by pronouncing sentence of condemnation upon a whole race, seemed, even to the most enlightened and best men of that time, almost to forbid the possibility that a Jew could, in any case, be an estimable man. The true Christian was then known by his hatred of the Jews, as the true Protestant by his polemics against the Catholics. Even twenty years after the publication of Lessing's drama, Schlözer did not hesitate to reproach the Jews publicly with a special propensity and faculty for highway robbery. One must be acquainted with the legislation of that day, and the condition of the Jews arising therefrom, in order to comprehend what must have been the feelings of noble, cultivated, and aspiring members of this people, like Mendelssohn and Gumpertz,

at the objections which even Michaelis raised against Lessing's charitable drama.

The communications of Lessing on this subject are of historical interest, as is the drama itself, since it was the first voice raised in Germany for this people, who, even in Prussia and Berlin, were deprived of the natural rights of men; whose marriage and begetting of children, not less than the earning of their daily bread, were subjected to the severest limitations of cruel laws, which extended the "protection" of the magistrate to only one child, and compelled the degraded Jew, as he passed through the city gate, to pay toll on his body, as though it were an article of merchandise. Lessing's play, however weak it may now appear to us, not only surpassed all the German dramas of that time, but was also a great moral action in behalf of oppressed humanity.

Concerning the rest of Lessing's juvenile plays we need say but few words. "The Old Maid" is mere platitude, derision of those silly women of the middle class who are ready to throw themselves and their money into the arms of bankrupt spendthrifts of the nobility. "The Treasure," an imitation of Plautus, is modelled entirely after the Roman poet, and, notwithstanding the effort to give to the ancient prototype more action and better development of motives, is, without doubt, the least important of these early productions. The fragments, and unfinished sketches of tragedies, are still written, both as to matter and manner, entirely from the French stand-point. Only the tragedy "Henzi," which treated of the downfall of Samuel Henzi, the patriot of Berne, whom the Bernese aristocracy beheaded in 1749, was

truly a bold and original project. For here Lessing turned to an historical subject, which none of his predecessors had ever done, and made prominent the great opposing elements of civil freedom and privileged despotism, whose conflict forty years afterwards was to shake the world. He adhered strictly to facts, and preserved even the names of the persons engaged in the proceeding. In spite of the unwieldiness of the heavy Alexandrines, and the close adherence to the traditional unities of time and place, it is yet evident that in this fragment, which attracted general attention, a fresh, free spirit is trying its young pinions.

It is the same spirit that, a few decades of years later, drew from the ranks of the reverential disciples of Gallo-Germanic pedantry, of which Gottsched was the representative, the immortal founders of our classic national literature, with Lessing at their head. The influence of Shakespeare is clearly visible, whose Julius Cæsar Lessing had read during the first year of his residence in Berlin (1749), by means of the very faithful translation made by Von Borck, the former Prussian ambassador to England.\*

The same influence is manifest, also, in the fragments and sketches of other tragedies, such as "Rome Freed," and "Alcibiades in Persia," and even in the poems of this period, the terse, ironical portrayal of the four republicans who conspired against Cæsar, namely, Brutus, Cassius, Decimus, and Cimber, is traceable to Shakespeare's example. Nevertheless, it was not Shakespeare

\* Danzel's Gottsched und seine Zeit., p. 148, contains specimens of the Alexandrines, into which the first translation of Shakespeare's play was rendered.



and the old English dramatists whom Lessing followed in the last and most important of his early plays, *Miss Sara Sampson*, but a phenomenon of English literature which had immediately preceded his own appearance as an author, the English family novel, and the tragedy of daily life.

A

## CHAPTER III.

## MISS SARA SAMPSON AND THE HOUSEHOLD TRAGEDY.

LESSING'S Miss Sara Sampson is now almost utterly forgotten, banished from the stage, and scarcely ever read even by the book-hunters ; but yet the work marks an epoch not only in the author's character, but in the growth of our national literature. "The English literature," says Danzel, "was the support on which the German literature climbed up during the greater part of the last century, until, in the last quarter, it was strong enough not only to stand alone, but also to communicate fresh vitality to its former prop." The new English element which permeated Germany, rejuvenating and reviving "like a gust of sea-air blowing through the sultry streets of a densely-populated city," was the demand to return from the ossification of forms and conventional rules to nature and freedom. Lessing was the first who obeyed this summons, and the first fruit of his obedience was his Miss Sara Sampson.

Let us now recall the condition of German poetical literature at the time when Lessing appeared. It stood wholly under the dominion of the old French system, the poetry of the *renaissance*, which the Latin races, by means of their natural affinity with the spirit of the newly-discovered ancient learning, had made a model of style in imitation of the antique. In Germany, on the con-

trary, where the national poesy had ceased to bloom, and the popular culture had been trampled in the dust during the Thirty Years' War, no such connection took place. The literature which had sprung up there during the century which intervened from the end of the Thirty Years' War till Lessing's first appearance, was a literature originating in learned culture, and having so little relation to the general spirit of the people and their language, that authors frequently chose to express themselves in Latin or French. Thus about this time was transplanted to Germany the style of the *renaissance*, in which was received at second hand, so to speak, that antique poetry whose best works were regarded by all Europe as not to be excelled, and alone worthy to be imitated. But these attempts at imitation lost in Germany all the charm, and grace, and vitality which they possessed in the kindred and therefore more appreciative Romanic nations. The poesy of the *renaissance* became ossified in that uncongenial climate to a stiff and lifeless formalism, which appeared most conspicuous in the drama. It is true that by the aid of this influence Gottsched had raised the stage and the drama from a state of barbarism, and brought them to some degree of culture. This was a meritorious act, but to give the drama intrinsic worth far surpassed his power. Lessing, who first attempted this, stood, as we have seen in his earliest plays, wholly on the basis of the French model. But the revolutionary impulse is already active in him. In his "Henri" he breaks through two essential rules of the style of the *renaissance*, namely, the law which requires that the scenes of tragedy shall be laid in remote times; and that other, which demands that its principal

characters shall be warriors, kings, and princes ; since he takes for his subject an historical event of his own day, the political revolution of a Swiss canton, and for his characters plain citizens of a petty republic.

Only one step more was wanting to reveal the emancipator of German literature and the founder of free poetry. Lessing took this step. He wrote his *Miss Sara Sampson* ; the first social, or rather, the first domestic tragedy of the German drama. He was incited to this work by the study of English literature, in which the French style had never taken firm root, and tragedy, even from the age of Shakespeare, had drawn its materials indiscriminately from all spheres of life.\* The so-called social tragedy arose in England at the same time that the affecting, or so-called "lachrymose comedy," appeared in France ; and Lessing, whose eyes were everywhere, expressed himself in his *Theatrical Library* concerning both these innovations, whilst he was already meditating the project of his *Miss Sara Sampson*. There are two important publications of the time whose spirit he adopted in this work : the celebrated novel *Clarissa*, and a play called the *Merchant of London*, by George Lillo. In both these productions poetry had chosen for its subject the morality of social life, and considered the inner conditions of the family from its earnest and tragical side. The keen glance of Lessing saw here the long-desired field opened for dramatic poesy, and he did not delay a moment to cultivate it. It is an error of Danzel that he charac-

\* Compare Hettner, *Literaturgeschichte des achtzehnten Jahrhunderts* I. 494, and his masterly sketch of the social drama in England, 491. Also Danzel, I. 296.

terizes Lessing's Miss Sara Sampson, in which he so justly recognizes a work of an entirely new class, and a peculiar interpretation of the principles of this species of poetry, as a combination of the fundamental ideas of both the above-mentioned English fictions. The piece is, on the contrary, wholly original in plot and execution, although the names and usages are borrowed from the English, and the whole is played on the soil of English situations. The danger for the tragedy of common life lies in the external limitation of its *personæ* by laws which the passions of kings, princes, heroes, and all who move on the heights of humanity, are able to elude. The purification of the passions, which, in the higher tragedy, is accomplished by the very nature of moral conflicts, and the "mighty destiny which elevates man when it crushes him," are, in the lower spheres of common conditions, only too easily degraded to the prose of vulgar criminality, and its penalty by the gallows and the wheel, as indeed Lillo's tragedy, the first drama of every-day life, clearly exhibits, so that, instead of poetical justice being represented by mental solution of the conflict, we have the naked moral relations of vice and its physical retribution.

In the Hamburg Dramaturgy, Lessing afterwards defended the tragedy of common life in opposition to the heroic, on not wholly satisfactory grounds, sustaining his position by an appeal to a saying of Marmontel, and even went so far as to declare, as a secondary and indifferent consideration, "to what class the suffering persons in the tragedy belong." It was through the misunderstanding of an assertion of Aristotle that he was led to the error of laying down the proposition,

that the misfortunes of "those *whose circumstances approach nearest our own* must naturally penetrate deepest into our souls, and if we should sympathize with kings, it would be as with men, and not with kings."

This view, which reveals a narrowness in Lessing's mind, and in accordance with which it would be necessary to have different tragedies for different classes of men, does not need to be refuted nowadays. It resulted from a weakness in the direction of the age, from that predilection for the sentimental which still held sway over the author of Miss Sara Sampson. The excellence of Lessing's performance was, that he freed the tragedy of common life from the prosaic criminal element, and discovered tragical conflicts peculiar to its situations. By penetrating into the interior of family life, into the depths of the perplexities of individual souls, he obtained also for the lower sphere of human action an arena wherein the absolute worth, and freedom, and sovereignty of the individual could assert themselves. This field is the family. For only in the relations of the family and the affections of the heart can the man whose capacities, as a citizen, are narrowly circumscribed, appear as a sovereign, a hero.

The plot of Lessing's Miss Sara Sampson is as follows: Mellefont, a young and wealthy debauchee, who has squandered a large property in the society of aristocratic rakes and dissolute women, conceives, at last, a passion for the daughter of a baronet, Sir William Sampson, which ends in a betrothal, and an elopement from the paternal home. To be sure, the young seducer really loves his victim; but the legalizing of his union with her by the priest's benediction, which the unfortu-

nate girl urgently demands, is prevented by two circumstances. He has squandered his fortune, and sees himself, therefore, dependent on an inheritance the possession of which is connected by will with a marriage clause. Although he takes steps to set aside this clause by a sacrifice of part of the inheritance, still he is not wholly in earnest with the marriage; not because he does not love Sara according to her full worth, but because, on account of the free life which he has long led (he is a man of thirty years), he has a horror of the external restraint, "the debit side" of matrimony. But, besides, he is bound by another circumstance. For ten years he has lived in the fetters of a woman of the fashionable world, a young and beautiful widow, familiar with all the arts of coquetry, from whom he has separated himself only in consequence of his passion for Sara. Mrs. Marwood is beside herself with rage on account of this desertion. Mellefont has not only sacrificed her to "a whim," he has also torn from her the daughter that she had borne him, and placed the child of ten years of age in a boarding-school. Mrs. Marwood, however, succeeds in obtaining possession of the child, and at the same time in feretting out the residence of her faithless lover, upon whom she has older claims, which are in some degree valid, since she still loves him in her way, and is unwilling, at any rate, to renounce his name which serves as a cloak of her family honor and social position. She follows him with her daughter, and likewise puts Sara's father on the trace of his fugitive child. At the first interview, by playing the part of magnanimous self-sacrifice and tender love, aided by the prayers of the child, she succeeds

in making an impression on the susceptible heart of Mellefont, and had almost brought him back to herself, when his conscience soon becomes fully aroused. He declares his fixed determination to separate from her, in spite of her Medea-threats, which are carried even to an attempt to murder him; but finally, when she pretends to have controlled and humbled herself, he permits her, according to her own desire to see her rival, to approach Sara under the disguise of one of his relatives. Mrs. Marwood had calculated on separating Sara from Mellefont by communications of mingled truth and falsehood. But when this plan fails, her only resource is — revenge. And so she poisons her rival, who had fallen into a swoon, by slipping into the hand of the chambermaid, instead of a soothing powder, a poison, which she had originally intended for herself. Then she escapes, taking with her, like a second Medea, her child, as a protection against pursuit; and Mellefont, who sees his beloved die at the very moment when the reconciled father of Sara greeted him as a son, stabs himself on her body, in the excess of his grief, as well as, he very inappropriately adds, “in order to punish himself for what has happened.”

We need not tarry long to discuss the errors and weaknesses of this piece. They are evident, not only in occasional instances of coarseness of expression,\* in the often tedious prolixity of the abstract moral reflections and the declamatory pulpit-tone, in the silly deportment, and the “refined, self-tormenting casuistry”

\* Such terms as “Niederträchtige” (base), “Weibsbild” (hussy), which Mellefont uses towards Mrs. Marwood, and the vulgarity which he shows in styling the mother of his child, in its presence, “the disgrace of her sex.”



of the seduced daughter, all reminding of Richardson's romance, but also in certain feeblenesses of the composition itself, in which a too intentional chance of decision is left to accident by the inexplicable imprudence of Mellefont. The lachrymose humor, the strong emphasis laid on the pathetic, the high-strung emotional tone, which now strike us so strangely as coming from the cool and forcible Lessing, — all are to be explained by the fact that he was at this time governed by the morbidly sentimental tendency of the age, and was attempting to elucidate and establish his theory of sympathy according to his view of the Aristotelian principle. But these defects are overbalanced by the fundamental significance of the work, which, with one stroke, had broken through the magic circle of *renaissance* tragedy, and in substance as well as in form (for *Miss Sara* is written in prose), opened a free course to an entirely new species of dramatic poetry. Even though this newly-won freedom was not yet complete, even though this first German family-tragedy presented not our German, but foreign life, with foreign customs, conditions, and names, and in a language still bearing a foreign coloring, nevertheless, with this production Lessing's former position was wholly abandoned, and the possibility afforded of throwing off, ten years later, in *Minna von Barnhelm*, the last vestige of dependence on foreign elements. It was in every respect a progress, and the admiration which it excited among contemporaries was well-founded. For the first time one saw, in a tragedy which moved wholly in the province of every-day life, individual characters which were the result of keen observation of men, instead of abstract

models of vice and virtue; one heard a language which, instead of the hollow, stilted pathos of Alexandrines, possessed the genuine energy of real passion. And if Mellefont, the prototype of the favorite half-characters of Goethe, as Clavigo, Weisslingen, Fernando, &c., appears stamped with admirable art, the character of Mrs. Marwood, after whom the piece should properly be called, is a form of such grandeur as has since been seldom attained in this province. A reviser of the piece, which, in its present state, is no longer representable, need only to follow out this character in order to produce a drama of great power even for the stage of to-day.

Whilst Lessing was engaged in giving the last touches to his work, Ackermann's troupe arrived in Berlin, where it gave representations at the City-hall, from the 29th of May to the 7th of June.\*

The attendance, however, was so small that Ackermann, to whom Lessing had committed his play, did not like to produce it in Berlin. The representation, therefore, took place on the 10th of July, 1755, at Frankfort on the Oder, whither Lessing himself went, in order to arrange the scenes for the stage, and to direct the rehearsals. Contemporary letters, written by both friends and enemies of the poet, bear witness to the extraordinary effect which the piece produced upon the spectators. "They sat," as Ramler writes to Gleim, "four hours, like statues, and dissolved in tears." It is interesting that the same troupe, a few days afterwards, played "The Merchant of London," and thus gave the spectators an opportunity to compare the

\* Schröder's Life, by Mayer, I. 28.

corresponding English piece with the German. The afterwards famous Schröder, then a boy of ten years, appeared in the character of the maiden Arabella; \* Ackermann played Mellefont, which part Eckhof afterwards assumed, and Brückner made his favorite *rôle*. Thus was given the model for all household dramas in Germany, and at the same time the series of those tragical themes inaugurated which were especially treated during the seventh decade of the last century.†

This work of Lessing was the egg of Columbus for the histrionic art in Germany, not less than for German dramatic literature. By introducing prose, the natural expression for noble, earnest events, and by basing the first great success of the German drama on the strongest feeling in the life of the German people, the family relation, he pointed the actor to the real truth of the emotions and of expression, and gave him for the first time the task of representing complete men and genuine characters, "in which the blending of antitheses into an individual demanded great nicety of development."‡

Thus Lessing became the emancipator of the German histrionic art from the fetters of tradition and acquired foreign conventionalities.

The democratic trait and impulse which reveal themselves in the phenomenon of the social and household drama did not escape the keen eye of Goethe, when he counted Lessing's piece amongst those "which served to bring to view the worth of the middle and lower classes." The third estate began to appreciate itself,

\* Schröder's Life, by Mayer, II. 140.

† Gervinus, Geschichte der deutschen Dichtung, V. 372.

‡ Compare the excellent description by Edward Devrient in his Geschichte der deutschen Schauspielkunst, II. 125.

and to esteem its fate as worthy of the highest form of poetic representation. England, France, and Germany exhibit in this respect the same spectacle, and it can well be said that the literary revolution against the kings and princes of the *renaissance* tragedy, was one of the significant preludes which heralded the political revolution against the kings and princes of the real world.

42

## CHAPTER IV.

## AN ATTEMPT TO TRAVEL, AND ITS CONSEQUENCES.

THE success of Miss Sara Sampson in the theatre, as well as in criticism, revived in Lessing the longing after a union with the living stage, of which he had hitherto been deprived in Berlin; for this first city of Northern Germany, the royal residence of the great Frederic, had, a hundred years ago, no German theatre. Lessing has powerfully described this state of things in one of his letters on literature. The king's preference for French literature and the French drama restrained every aspiration of the German histrionic art in his capital. At the time of Lessing's first and second sojourn in Berlin, there prevailed in that city only the rude theatricals of vagabond players, from whose performances all who made any pretence to culture kept aloof.

Even Ackermann's troupe was able in 1755 to produce only seven representations. Schönemann's troupe, which had possessed since 1743 a general privilege for Prussia, had a strong rival in the company of Franz Schuch, which from 1754 to 1759 performed their improvised comedies and harlequinades in a rough booth on the Gens d'armes Market-place, and afterwards in the edifice now occupied by the finance ministry. Miserable as were these attempts, they were diligently

patronized by Lessing, who saw here, for the first time, the popular comedy of Dr. Faust, and even composed in 1754 an epilogue for Madame Schuch. Even ten years later, when the theatre director Döbellin, by the representation of Lessing's *Minna von Barnhelm*, first excited an interest in the inhabitants of Berlin for the drama of their own country, the stage of the Prussian capital was a quarter of a century behind those of the majority of the cities in Central Germany, and not till 1771 did Koch succeed in laying there the foundation of a permanent German theatre. What Lessing sought for, he could then find only in the place where his theatrical taste had first been awakened, namely, in Leipsic, the centre of German taste and culture at that time. There, in 1751, the actor Henry Gottfried Koch, who had been his friend ever since the days of Madame Neuber's company, had founded a theatre of his own, and obtained for it the talented actor Brückner, a finely cultivated man, and already an intimate friend of Lessing in Berlin. Lessing, therefore, left Berlin in the autumn of 1755, without saying a word to his friends (as usual), and went to Leipsic. To revive the German stage fundamentally and independently, to elevate the drama to a worthy reflection of national culture, appeared to him, more than ever since his recent success, a life problem, to the solution of which he was bound to devote his best powers. He entered into the closest connection with Koch's stage, and lived and moved, as in former years, wholly with and among actors. He had his "*Sara*" abridged by Weisse, and represented anew, and assisted his friend Brückner in studying the part of Mellefont. He read the comedies

of Goldoni, who was then wandering about in the cities of Upper Italy as theatre director and dramatist, and felt himself incited anew to dramatic production. One of those comedies, *L'Erede Fortunata* (the Fortunate Heiress), he immediately appropriated and elaborated. Koch was to represent it before its publication. He sketched the plan of five other plays. However, the first piece was elaborated only to the end of the second act, and the others not at all, since Lessing fell out with his Leipsic publisher during the printing of the Fortunate Heiress, and soon afterwards formed a connection which promised to give his life a wholly different turn for several years to come.

A nature like Lessing's, which was based wholly upon an active and experimental view of life, must necessarily be filled with a strong desire to obtain a greater knowledge of the world than had hitherto been granted to him. In fact, a wish to travel was his whole life long a prominent trait in his character. Already he had been much inclined to accept a call to the newly-established University of Moscow as professor of the German language, and of eloquence, since no one in Berlin or Germany seemed willing to encourage his efforts. Fortunately, the disgrace of forcing such a man to seek his livelihood in a foreign country was spared Germany, as his special adversary, the disciple of Gottsched, John Gottfried Reichel, author of *Bodmerias*, was called to Moscow in his stead. But Lessing was now twenty-six years of age; he was free, and unrestrained by any office, and there seemed no present prospect of securing a permanent and agreeable position. Therefore he was the more strongly

impelled to use his liberty, and was about to accept a proposition made by Sulzer, and to travel as tutor and companion to a young Swiss, when suddenly an incomparably more advantageous proposal of a similar kind was made to him in Leipsic. A young and wealthy patrician of that city, Winkler by name, owner of the stately mansion at Feuerkugel, sought a companion for three years' travel in Europe for the purpose of general culture. Lessing was mentioned, and both parties accepted the plan. Lessing was extremely delighted. "It was at no ill-starred hour that I left Berlin," he wrote to his beloved friend Mendelssohn, on the 8th of December, 1755. "You know the proposal made by Professor Sulzer in reference to a journey into foreign parts. This will now amount to nothing, since I have accepted another, which is, for me, infinitely better. I shall travel, not as governor, not under the burden of a boy bound to my soul, not according to the prescriptions of a capricious family, but as the companion of a man who is wanting neither in ability nor disposition to make the journey as pleasant and profitable to me, as I shall wish to make it to myself. It is a young Winkler, about my age, of excellent character, and without parents or friends according to whose whims he would be obliged to direct himself. He is inclined to leave all the arrangements to me, and, in fine, he will have travelled with me, rather than I with him."

This journey was to begin at Easter, 1756. By that time he wished to have completed his six new comedies, and thus close, for the present, his dramatical career. "I must hasten," he wrote, "to cram up my puerilities; the longer I delay them, the more severe, I



fear, will be my own judgment concerning them." It is evident that he recognized in this adherence to Goldoni a retrogression in comparison with Miss Sara Sampson, a relapse into the old conventional form of the drama, of which he was destined to be the reformer with his *Minna von Barnhelm*. He was also glad at the prospect of an interruption for some years to his laborious productivity as an author. There is deep earnestness in the words which he addressed to Mendelssohn on this subject: "Should the public wish to humiliate me in some degree because I am too diligent as a writer, should it refuse applause because I have sought applause too often, then, on the other hand, I will bribe its favor with the promise that from the coming Easter it shall neither see, nor hear of, me again for three years." Before beginning his journey he had the pleasure of meeting his parents, after a separation of eight years. He met them in Dresden, whither he had repaired in order to examine the art collections of that city, preparatory to his meditated visits to other galleries; and they had gone there to make a reconciliatory compromise with a preacher of Freiberg, by whose clerical cunning they had been cheated out of a considerable inheritance, their only resource in their straitened circumstances. Lessing was obliged to accompany his parents home, and their joy at seeing their noble son was so great that they forgot the meagre compromise made for the honor of God, to which the worthy pastor *primarius* had consented, in order not to throw a disadvantageous light upon the clerical class by exposing the disgraceful knavery of a brother in office.\* From Ka-

\* Karl Lessing, I. 182.

menz Lessing returned to Dresden, where he became acquainted with Heyne, who was still a copyist in the Brühl Library, but he did not see his (afterwards) great ally, Winckelmann, who then lived there also, and was already preparing for his Italian journey. In Leipsic he used his intercourse with his former teacher, Christ, in preparing for the artistic and scientific purposes of his tour, upon which he entered with his companion on the 10th of May.

The first goal was Holland. People travelled then much more slowly and tediously, but also with much greater thoroughness than it is possible for us nowadays to imagine. For the travellers required not less than eighty days to pass through Magdeburg, Halberstadt, Brunswick, Hanover, Celle, Lüneburg, Hamburg, Bremen, Oldenburg, Emden, Gröningen, Leeuwarden, Franeker, Harlingen, and the Zuyder Zee to Amsterdam, where they arrived on the 29th of July, and whence Lessing sent to his father a brief account of his journey.

Unfortunately, the diary which Lessing's brother possessed has been lost, and we cannot therefore speak in detail concerning the interests pursued, especially during this time. We only know that he diligently visited all art galleries, and induced his companion to purchase a rich series of engravings. His interest in the drama also accompanied him. In Hamburg he became personally acquainted with, and learned to admire, the greatest German actor of that period, Conrad Eckhof, and promised, after his departure, to elaborate for him one of Weisse's productions ; \* and in a letter addressed

\* Weisse's Selbstbiographie, 37.

from Emden to his friend Nicolai in Berlin, he announced that he would shortly send a quantity of observations on the Household Tragedy, which he had written down on his way. From Amsterdam excursions were made to the principal cities of the United Provinces, and the travellers were just on the eve of crossing over into England, when intelligence of the invasion of Saxony by the Prussian king induced Lessing's companion to return in September to Leipsic, where the Prussian General Hausen had already taken quarters in his house.

Lessing was all the more inconsolable on account of this turn of affairs, because the entire projected four years' tour, on which he had built so many hopes, threatened to come to nought, as indeed it did.

At first he kept hoping that after a few months the journey would be resumed, and so he remained in Leipsic, although this state of uncertainty was by no means agreeable.\* But it was to become still more disagreeable to him. At the close of November he still believed that the plan would be carried out, in which the next goal was England. He announced this to Nicolai, with the remarkable words, "How much would I prefer to spend the coming summer with you and our friend Mendelssohn than in England! Perhaps I shall learn there nothing more than that one can admire a nation and hate it too." He also speaks of this journey in a letter to the same friend, dated the 29th of March, of the following year (1757). But in May Lessing begins to think of returning to Berlin. In fact, his companion had not only abandoned the whole journey, but, what was worse, the political relations of Saxony had

\* For this reason he remained there for a time "wholly incognito."

caused a complete rupture between himself and Lessing. The matter was this. Lessing, however much personal reason he had to deprecate the outbreak of a war which destroyed an important life-plan, was yet too sharp-sighted and liberal-minded to join in the general abuse of the king and his enterprise, heard on all sides in Leipsic, which was now burdened with quarterings of soldiers and heavy exactions in money and supplies. He rather endeavored to maintain a position above the contending parties; and, whilst in Berlin he was regarded as the author of a *brochure* hostile to Prussia, which exposed its real author, Heyne, to great danger in Dresden, now occupied by Prussian troops, he received credit in Leipsic for a pamphlet directed against the Saxon interests, whereby he came into very evil repute among his patriotic countrymen. Of both charges he was innocent. But it is certain that Lessing, in his table-talk, not only frequently took part for Prussia, but also introduced Major Kleist, and other Prussian officers, to the table, where he was accustomed to dine with Winkler. This caused the latter, who was a narrow soul, and thereby an inveterate Saxon, to come to an open quarrel. He notified Lessing to quit his lodgings (which were in Winkler's house), and even refused the payment of six hundred thalers, secured by contract, as indemnification in case the journey should be given up. Lessing was forced to commence a suit, which was decided in his favor after a seven years' trial, which, however, was then regarded as a miracle of despatch.\*

\* Karl Lessing, I. 187.

## CHAPTER V.

LITERARY LABORS FOR DAILY BREAD. RESEARCHES  
INTO THE DRAMA.

MEANWHILE Lessing found his situation at Leipzig very unpleasant. The theatre had been broken up by the war, and the resumption of his dramaturgical interests was out of the question. The prospect of four years' free time for study had likewise vanished, and he had sacrificed to his convictions the advantages of a connection with Winkler. Necessity compelled him, therefore, since he could not prevail upon himself to accept offers of situations as private tutor, to find some kind of literary work that would furnish his subsistence. He translated Hutcheson's "System of Moral Philosophy," and Richardson's "Familiar Letters for the Use of Young People;" and, at the suggestion of his pious sister, a devotional book, "Law's Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life." The whole period from May, 1757, to May, 1758, was a grievous time for him. He suffered extreme want, and there were hours when he could not master his indignation that the king, whom he honored as the greatest monarch of his age, had never shown the slightest interest in him.\* His friends Kleist, Gleim, and Sulzer in vain used every effort to procure for him a

\* Compare the letters to Ramler, and the sketch of the melancholy ode, "Mæcenas."

permanent position as librarian in Berlin, or even in the administrative department as judge advocate. It seemed to them a disgrace to Prussia not to win for herself a man like Lessing. "It would be wrong," wrote the excellent Kleist to Gleim, "to allow Lessing to leave the country a second time for want of subsistence." "Coöperate with me," he says in a second letter, "that our beloved Lessing may finally obtain a livelihood. He is much to be pitied; none of my friends has ever yet fared so ill." Sulzer also "deplores" "that a man like Lessing should still be troubled for his sustenance, and that even the little he desires should be unattainable by him." \* But it was fated that Prussia and her great Frederic should neither now nor later be wise enough to add to the conquest of Silesia the honor of winning the greatest mind in Germany.

Lessing's own letters of this period show scarcely a trace of his oppressed condition. His proud spirit, sustained by the energy of youth, disdained to complain of personal necessities of this kind; and in reading his correspondence with Nicolai and Mendelssohn, one believes him to be a man who in a leisure free from care pursues the ideal interests of philosophy and art.

In fact, it was under the heaviest pressure of external circumstances that he first occupied himself theoretically with the important question of the aim of the drama, which he had hitherto only casually and cursorily touched, in connection with his productive activity in this province. The occasion was given by an article on tragedy, with which Nicolai had opened his newly-established journal, "The Universal German Library." The substance of

\* Compare Danzel, I. 331.

the epistolary exchange of ideas thus excited amounts to about the following results as regards the then æsthetical stand-point of Lessing.

First, he defended, in opposition to Nicolai, the view of the moral purpose of tragedy, in Aristotle's sense, by exciting sympathy in the spectator, for "the sympathetic man is the best man, and most disposed to all kinds of magnanimity, and to all social virtues." Sympathy, emotion, are considered, then, in the letters to Mendelssohn, who takes up the subject, as the essential effect of tragedy; and thus not only the French tragedy, based on admiration, is rejected, but that form is presented as the only true one, corresponding to its conception and purpose, which Lessing, in adhering to the emotional element prevalent in the more recent English literature, had lately cultivated; namely, the social and household tragedy, to which class Miss Sara Sampson belonged. Finally, Lessing declared himself against the æsthetical pleasure which rests on illusion. The conception of illusion and its effect is, that the objects produced by art appear to us as real. But Lessing declares, on the contrary, that æsthetic pleasure consists in entirely relinquishing the reality of represented objects.\* As these letters may be regarded as the forerunners of the Dramaturgy,† so the æsthetical thoughts here excited appear also as forerunners of the fundamental idea of Kant's theory of beauty. But whilst Lessing in this manner endeavored to obtain a clear conception of the essential theoretical principles of that species of poetry which had

\* Danzel, I. 360.

† The correspondence on this subject begins with Nicolai's letter to Lessing of August 31, 1756, and ends with Mendelssohn's letter to Lessing of May 14, 1757.

hitherto occupied him, he was already quietly elaborating the plan of a work with which he intended to verify these principles anew in a practical manner. This work was none other than *Emilia Galotti*.

Nicolai had just at this time established, in connection with Mendelssohn, his celebrated literary periodical, the "Library of Polite Letters and Liberal Arts," and in the beginning had offered a prize for the best German tragedy.

As is well known, the young poet Baron von Cronegk (who died before the decision was made) won this prize by his tragedy "Kodrus." The second tragedy deemed worthy of publication was "The Free-thinker," by another young nobleman, Von Brawe, who also died shortly afterwards. Lessing had shown much interest in these prize efforts, and had even rendered material aid to the author of the *Free-thinker*, while the work of Von Cronegk had incited him to resume the same study which had before occupied his mind. But instead of carrying out this project, he resolved to enter the lists with a new drama. He kept this design so secret, however, that not even his most intimate friends in Leipsic, Kleist and Weisse, knew anything about it. Whilst these believed that Lessing had lost all interest in the theatre, he, who was somewhat fond of such mystifications, wrote to Mendelssohn at Berlin, "There is a young man here working at a tragedy, which, perhaps, might be the best of all, if he could only devote a few months more to it;" and shortly afterwards he wrote to Nicolai on the same subject, and begged him to repeat the prize offer for a tragedy, since by that time his young poet might hope to have finished his work; "from whom," he adds jestingly, "through



my vanity, I promise much that is good, for he labors very much after my own plan. He composes seven lines every seven days ; he enlarges his plan unceasingly, and erases constantly from what he has already elaborated. His present subject is a Virginia *bourgeoise*, to whom he has given the name of Emilia Galotti. That is to say, he has separated the story of the Roman Virginia from its political consequences, as he believes that the fate of a daughter who is killed by her father because her virtue is more precious to him than her life, is in itself sufficiently tragical to agitate the whole soul, though no overthrow of the entire state constitution follows. His play is limited to three acts, and he uses, without hesitation, all the freedom of the English stage. I will say no more to you about this matter ; only this is certain, that I could wish the thought had occurred to me, on account of the excellence of the subject. It seems to me so beautiful, that doubtless I should never have finished its development, from fear of spoiling it."

It is evident how deeply Lessing was penetrated by the idea of the family tragedy. For this reason he abandoned his former plan of elaborating the historical Virginia, of which a fragment was found in his posthumous papers. The new piece itself was not completed till fifteen years after its commencement, for in his present condition both disposition and leisure were wanting to the poet. His situation at Leipsic became constantly more uncomfortable and oppressive. Koch's theatrical troupe had been driven away by the war, and thus Lessing lacked the encouragement of the actual stage, which he so much needed. The circle of his acquaintances, too, was gradually broken up. Brawe

died; Ewald went to England; Weisse could not compensate him entirely for the loss of his Berlin friends. There remained to him only the amiable Kleist, with whom he had formed one of the closest friendships of his whole life. Even while he was writing his *Miss Sara Sampson* at Potsdam, Kleist, who then lived there, had sought his society. Lessing now found him sick at Leipsic, whither he had been sent, much against his will, as major, and chief of the commissary department.

Ewald Christian von Kleist, born 1715, had first studied law at Königsberg, but at the same time had turned his attention especially to ancient and modern literature. Compelled by his family to exchange the civil for the military career, he had first entered the Danish, and afterwards the Prussian service, without, however, relinquishing the society of the Muses. His poem entitled "*Spring*," originally published anonymously, had elicited extraordinary approbation, and great productions were anticipated from the poet. Kleist was fourteen years older than Lessing; but neither the difference between them in years nor in station prevented the closest connection of these two men, who were attracted to each other by their heroic nature, their nobleness of soul, and grandeur of character, as well as by their love of polite literature.

It was due to Lessing, who, in spite of his disagreeable circumstances, still preserved the elasticity of his mind and the cheerfulness of his temper, that Kleist recovered from a severe sickness. Lessing became his counsellor in the poetical labors with which the warrior, wearied with idleness, beguiled his involuntary leisure; and the beautiful ode which Lessing addressed to his

friend \* bears testimony to their mutual affection, and to the great hopes which Lessing based on Kleist's endowments. As the latter, in his thirst for great deeds, felt very unhappy to be obliged to remain in Leipsic, in charge of a Lazaretto, instead of winning laurels on the battle-field, Lessing consoled him with the beautiful saying of Xenophon, that the bravest are always the most sympathetic and helpful.

This intercourse was Kleist's "only pleasure" in Leipsic; and the separation from his friend, which was for all time, grieved him deeply. "I had become so accustomed to him," he wrote to Gleim after Lessing had left Leipsic, "and loved him so much, that it seems to me as if he were dead, or, rather, as if I were half dead." We have already seen how actively he exerted himself for the improvement of Lessing's external condition. And when, soon after the separation from his beloved companion, he was himself called to the field, where he was destined to find a hero's death at Kunersdorf (August 24, 1759), he commissioned Gleim, with whom he had deposited his little fortune of twelve hundred thalers, to divide two hundred thalers between Lessing and Ramler. He had already at Leipsic, in the most delicate and generous manner, alleviated the distress of his friend, as Mendelssohn also had not failed to render assistance, though Lessing did not ask it in either case. Many years after Kleist's death, Lessing was happy in being able to make a rich recompense for this favor by helping a nephew of his friend. Never in after life did the loss of a friend give such pain to Lessing's heart as did the early death of Kleist.

\* Compare Kleist's *Leben*, by Körte, 76.

Besides the above-mentioned labors, Lessing, during his sojourn at Leipsic, promoted the journalistic enterprise of Nicolai, by superintending the printing of the "Universal General Library," published in that city, and also by editing the contributions to the paper, even furnishing a few himself, though none of great importance. He published therein the first songs of the "Prussian Grenadier," by Gleim, and accompanied them with an introduction. These songs exerted a powerful influence over his mind, taking him back to old war-songs of every kind, to Tyrtæus, and the German epic, and inducing him to send to Gleim the sketch of an ode to the great Prussian king, whom he had celebrated in song two years before at Berlin. But his position in Leipsic became intolerable on account of his political views. He longed to return to Berlin, where, as he wrote to Gleim, "he would no longer be obliged to tell his acquaintances only by a whisper in the ear, that, in spite of all drawbacks, Frederic is a great king." When now his beloved friend Kleist received orders to join with his battalion the army of Prince Henry, the last tie was broken which bound him to a city surrounded by the tumult of war, and he left it on the 4th of May, to return to Berlin, where his friends had long awaited his coming with eager desire.



# GOTTHOLD EPHRAIM LESSING.

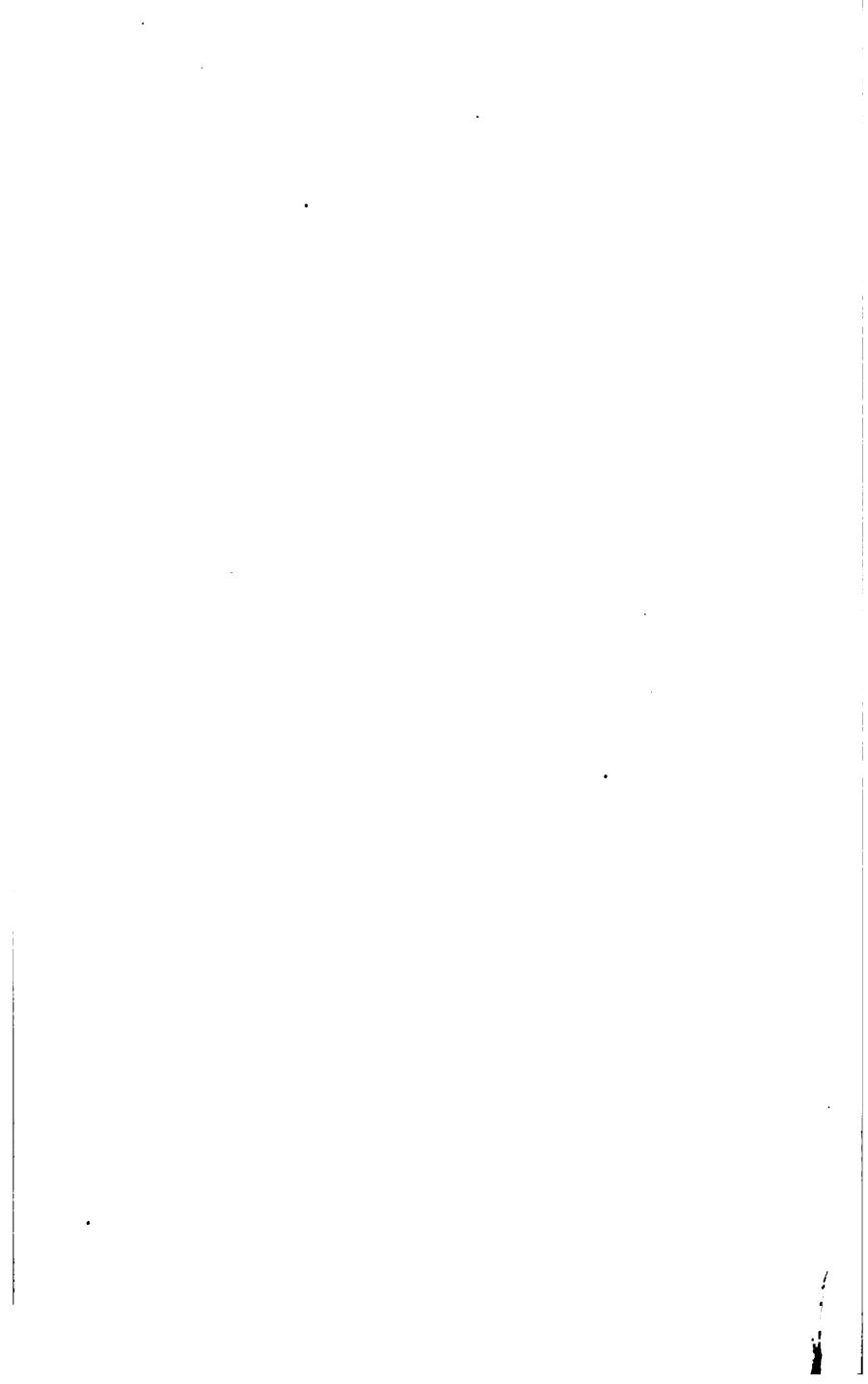
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## BOOK FOURTH.

THIRD SOJOURN AT BERLIN — THE LETTERS  
ON LITERATURE — FABLES — PHILOTAS —  
FAUST.

1755 — 1760.

( 175 )



## CHAPTER I.

## GLEIM AND KLEIST.

**I**T was an enthusiastic and agitated life that greeted Lessing on his return to Berlin. The capital of Prussia, as well as the entire Prussian nation, appeared elevated by the lofty deeds and heroic fame of their great king, who, adorned with the laurels of Lowositz, Prague, and Rossbach, defied a whole world united in arms against him. Nor did Lessing escape the general impression. In spite of his predominant cosmopolitanism, he felt that his place was by the side of the man who, after having broken through the malicious snare of Saxon treachery, now drew his sword, not only for political conquest, but also for the cause of Protestantism, enlightenment, and intellectual freedom, in opposition to Austrian Jesuitism and Russian barbarism, as well as for the honor of German nationality against the arrogance of France. All his Berlin friends too, as Mendelssohn, Ramler, and Nicolai, were ardent Prussians, Gleim composed his inspired grenadier songs for the glorification of the king and his brave army, and in the ranks of that army fought the man who had won the deepest love of Lessing's soul, Ewald Christian von Kleist, at once a bard and a hero. Nearly all of Lessing's letters of this period, which have been preserved, are addressed to Gleim, and most of them contain indications, though necessarily brief, of the great military events of the time.



The surprise of Hochkirch, on the 6th of October, a day so fatal for Prussia, extorted from him, as indeed from many another, "How was it possible for them to allow themselves to be surprised by the Austrians!" and he can hardly become reconciled to the thought that "the sleepy Daun should have succeeded in such a *coup-de-main*." But "the king himself has promised better news soon," and so Lessing, with his friends, hopes for the best, and that all will yet end well; for, as he says in the preface to Gleim's war-songs, "Heroic virtues are native to the Prussians, as well as to the Spartans of antiquity." He publishes Gleim's songs in a volume, and provides for the distribution of copies among the regiments of the Prussian army. He announces that a number of these have been set to music, and that the regiment to which Kleist belongs has already a march composed after one of them. But even here he cannot prove false to the higher cosmopolitan stand-point of his culture. The extravagances of Gleim's patriotism are offensive to him, and he wishes to see preserved in the poetical attack on the enemy the moderation which looks beyond the moment; he wishes to diffuse that broad humane culture which "leaves to priests" all curses and denunciations; and consequently he changes in the songs what appears to him to exceed these bounds. He was anxious only for his Kleist. He knew the heroic nature of his friend, who, having been long neglected by his king, burned with the desire to prove, by bold deeds of devotion, that this neglect was undeserved. Kleist is, perhaps, the only man who, by his whole character, not less than by his poetic proclivity, exerted an influence over Lessing, which was all the greater because of the

strong affinity between their souls. For this poet of "Spring" possessed that earnestness and simplicity which could edify even a Lessing; he was a thorough German in the best sense of the word, and strove to reproduce the national character in his works; he was a poet who exemplified the prowess which he sung, and sealed it with a hero's death in his first battle, where his valor and his fate had been already foreshadowed in his splendid poem to the Prussian army, written during the second year of the war.

"And I — great Heaven, I claim this at Thy hand —  
Shall lead a dauntless and heroic band :  
I see the foe in haste before us yield,  
And find my death, or honor, on the field !"

He was the Theodore Körner of the Seven Years' War, but free from any romantic coquetry with lyre and sword. For, whilst he was probably the only officer in the army of the great king who did homage to the Muses amidst the tumult of the camp, he carefully concealed his poetical efforts from the eyes of his companions in arms; as also, in spite of all the entreaties of Lessing, he refused to permit his picture to be used as frontispiece to Nicolai's new journal, in order, as he wrote to Gleim, not "to become ridiculous among his fellow-officers, by whom it was regarded as a kind of disgrace to be a poet." It was Kleist to whom Lessing addressed (in thought) his famous Letters on Literature, to be hereafter mentioned; it was this friend whose heroic virtue lent him coloring for his "Philotas," as in this poem he emulated Kleist's endeavor to attain pithy conciseness and power of expression; and through this intercourse he obtained

the views out of which afterwards grew the worthy conception and characterization of the military class in Minna von Barnhelm. It was Kleist's manly and upright character, his earnest love of truth, and his elevation above all weak considerations of personal vanity which, so long as he lived, maintained Lessing's relation to the mutual friends Gleim and Ramler, who were only too susceptible in this respect, since their complaints of Lessing's severity of judgment found no hearing with him.

It seems as though Lessing could not rid himself of a premonition of his dear friend's fate. "What anxieties I suffer on his account I cannot express," he writes to Gleim. "I fear, I fear he will now find more to do than he wishes." On the 24th of August came the first definite intelligence to Berlin concerning the unfortunate battle of Kunersdorf. Lessing learned that his Kleist was wounded and a prisoner. He wrote to him at Frankfort, via Dantzic; he provided, since he anticipated that his friend "would be completely stripped by the Russians," that sufficient money should be remitted to him in Frankfort, and, in case he should be brought to Prussia and Poland, in Dantzic. He wrote to friends in Frankfort, earnestly recommending the wounded man to their attention.

When the news arrives, seven days later, that Kleist had died of his wounds, he cannot believe it. He seeks to console himself and Gleim with the probability of a mistake of name. There was another Major Kleist wounded and a prisoner. He writes to Gleim, September 1, 1759, "He has probably died, and not *our* Kleist. No! *our* Kleist is not dead; it cannot be; he still lives. *I will not* grieve before the time, neither will I afflict

you prematurely ; let us hope for the best." He wishes to hasten to Frankfort, though the city is full of the enemy. " If he still lives I will seek him out. Shall I never see him again ? Shall I never more in my life speak with him, and embrace him ? " And when, a few days afterwards, the sad certainty was made plain, how affecting in its grand simplicity is Lessing's expression of sorrow for the irretrievable loss ! None of all his letters so reveals the man's whole heart as that which he wrote to Gleim on the 6th of September.

" Alas ! dear friend, it is too true. He is dead. We have him no more. He died in the house and in the arms of Professor Nicolai. He was constantly calm and cheerful, even in the severest pain. He longed greatly to see his friends again. Would that it had been possible ! My sorrow over this event is a very wild sorrow. I do not, indeed, demand that the balls should take another way because an honest man stands in their path. But I do demand that the honest man — See : frequently grief leads me to be angry with him whom it concerns. He had already three, four wounds ; why did he not go ? Generals with fewer and slighter wounds have retired from the field without dishonor. He wished to die. Pardon me if I go to excess in speaking of him. It is said that he would not have died if he had not been neglected ! Neglected ! I know not on whom I should take vengeance ! The wretches — to neglect him ! Professor Nicolai has pronounced his funeral oration ; another, I know not whom, has written an elegy upon him. They cannot have lost much in Kleist who can do that now. The professor intends to publish his oration, and it is so miserable ! I know certainly that

Kleist would have preferred to take another wound with him into the grave, rather than to have such stuff babbled after him. Has a professor really a heart? He desires now to have verses from Ramler and myself to print with his oration. If he has desired the same of you, and you gratify his desire — Dearest Gleim, you must not do it! You will not do it!”

Here is Lessing complete; with his deep, pure, and strong feeling, with his whole energy of heart, of which this mournful cry is the sublimest panegyric of the lamented hero. Lessing never found a compensation for this loss. But, with the heroism of his fallen friend, he soon lifted his head out of his deep despondency, and went on in the grand career of his fame; seeking, and finding, not oblivion, but strength, in laboring for the culture of his nation.

## CHAPTER II.

## THE LETTERS ON LITERATURE.

WE have seen that, in Leipsic, the stimulus of Gleim's war-songs had led Lessing to the study of old German poesy. The Essay on the Book of Heroes had been begun at that time, and he now continued these studies at Berlin, the fruits of which were afterwards lost to him by the dishonesty of a servant, who sold many of his books and manuscripts as waste paper. Although the results of these investigations are now without significance, yet it is a circumstance of great importance, that he, who, as Danzel observes, "had hitherto, like all his contemporaries, derived his intellectual nutriment and stimulus from the works of the ancients, and from those modern literatures which resemble ancient models, now conceived an interest for genuine national poetry." A fruit of this interest was the revision and publication of a selection of epigrams by the Silesian poet Frederic von Logau, of the seventeenth century, which, with annotations on the language of the poet, he undertook in connection with Ramler.\* He also exhibited at this time an extraordinary activity in many directions, and had, as Ramler writes, "a hand in ten things at once." With the latter he now formed a

\* Danzel, I. 372-376.

close intimacy. "Mr. Ramler and I," he writes to Gleim, "form project upon project. Only wait a quarter of a century, and you will be astonished at all that we have written. Especially I! I write day and night, and my lowest aim is to make at least three times as many dramas as Lope de Vega. I shall soon have my Dr. Faust played here." It is obvious that Lessing does not lose sight of the drama, which he still considered the nucleus of national literature. We shall soon return to his labor with the Faust legend, of which only the familiar dramatic fragment remains, as well as to the tragedy *Philotas*, which also belongs to this period. At present, however, we must notice an undertaking of Lessing which was destined to produce a truly revolutionary movement in German literature. This undertaking was the celebrated "Letters on Literature." Nicolai had been compelled, by external circumstances, to give over to Weisse his journal, published at Leipsic, namely, the "Library of Polite Literature and the Liberal Arts." Lessing, who had never been satisfied with this journal, now determined to establish a critical organ of his own, wherein, with his friends Nicolai and Mendelssohn, he wished to subject the most recent German literature to a thorough criticism. In the familiar form of letters, addressed to a military friend, wounded on the field, — here Lessing was thinking of his friend Kleist, — he intended to discuss the most important publications that had appeared since the commencement of the war. These letters were to be issued weekly, and the names of their writers to remain secret. Anonymous authorship was then very popular, and Lessing adhered to it the more closely in this case, because he did not

wish to give his journal the appearance of a party organ, and so injure its efficiency. That he was the soul of the whole scheme, was, however, instinctively detected, especially by enemies envious of his fame, like Gottsched and Klotz, although Lessing kept his communications private even from his nearest friends, and his real share in the work was not discovered till after his death.

The Letters on Literature are the most important and influential phenomenon of German journalism in the eighteenth century. They appeared in a period distinguished for its lofty tone of mind, and in their own towering boldness they are a true picture of the intrepid disposition of the age. In them German criticism first attained to the manly earnestness which penetrates to the kernel and essence of literary phenomena, and forms its decisions, not from isolated features, but according to the totality of a creation. "The goodness of a work" — thus Lessing states the fundamental principle of his criticism, "depends not on individual beauties; these must constitute a *beautiful whole*, or the connoisseur cannot but read it with displeasure. Only when the *whole* is found irreproachable, the judge must desist from a disadvantageous dissection, and regard the work as a philosopher does the world." Measured by this rule, even the contributions of his collaborators seem to him "very far from rigid enough," whilst all the world was crying Ah! and Woe! over the critical severity of the Letters on Literature. In fact Lessing stood already upon an eminence which separated him even from his chosen friends. They had been content, in the Library of Polite Literature, to apply to special cases in recent productions,



certain general rules, derived from acknowledged standard works, especially ancient ones. Lessing, on the contrary, aimed to represent the peculiar law and process of modern literary production, through the medium of consciousness. By this means he became the creator of modern criticism; and it is this manner of proceeding, which, according to Danzel's fine expression, lends "eternal youth" to his letters, and makes them the oldest German writings which are still read, whilst all preceding them — the writings of Gottsched and his disciples, of the Swiss and of the mediating school, and even Lessing's earlier productions — have all sunk into oblivion, and are now objects only of learned investigation.

The new domain which Lessing had designed to win with his "Letters," was none other than that of a peculiarly German literature, springing from the innermost life of the nation, in which the true form and intellectual character of the present should be impartially represented.\* We know that he put forth the first model of such a literature in his *Minna von Barnhelm*. But now the task was to cleanse thoroughly the Augean stable of German literature. Lessing undertook this herculean labor with zeal. Sciolism and superficiality in study, negligence in the use of language, shallow profuseness of inferior minds, who, nevertheless, regarded themselves as geniuses, and were declared to be such by officious friends under condition of returning the favor, had then reached a height in German literature of which even the "Letters" give us only an approximate conception. Into the midst of this self-complacent, thoughtless, and indolent mediocrity, Lessing

\* Danzel, I. 391-450.

now hurled the burning thunderbolts of his annihilating criticism. The very first letter, in which he bluntly declared that the most recent German productions were not worth speaking of, must have scattered terror among all that rabble of authors. Sentence was first passed on bad translators, who, without any knowledge of language, undertook the translation of foreign works "in order to learn the language in which they were written, and thus caused incalculable mischief." Those poor sinners, like Dusch, Bergmann, Palthen, Lieberkühn, and others, whose school-boy blunders Lessing condescended to expose, are now forgotten; but the manner in which he did the business delights us even now, when we are enjoying the wholesome effects of his severity in a literature which, more than any other, exhibits the finest translations of ancient and modern foreign works. And as he began with the chastisement of frivolous translators, so he closed with commendations of an excellent one, the early deceased Meinhard, to whom he erected a well-deserved monument of honor.\*

The Letters on Literature were not at all a regular review. They were excursions in every direction through the literary realm, undertaken by a bold and well-equipped warrior, and according to his own pleasure, and from the most accidental impulse. The important matter was not the books and authors discussed, but the thoughts and principles which they caused him to develop, the truths which they caused him to utter. Thus in the Hanoverian Dusch he scourged the fulsomeness and frivolous voluminousness of that time in such a manner as — a rare case! — to bring the so mercilessly chastised

\* Danzel-Guhrauer, II. 1, 6.

author to his senses, although he at first made the most desperate attempts to kick against the pricks of Lessing's critique. He continues the war against the platitudes of Gottsched and the clique patronized by him, and insists, above all, on that moral truthfulness which never belies itself for flatteries; being convinced that an emphatic warning against a bad book is a service rendered to the commonwealth, and therefore far more becoming to an honest man than servile skill in buying praise for praise. He extends his view to the past of German literature by the history of the German hexameter, and by reference to the forgotten epigrams of Logau; and at the same time distinguishes the poems of Kleist and Gerstenberg, as well as Gleim's war-song, from the mass of the chaff of lyrical productions. Even the foreign Volkslied does not escape him, and the "*naïveté* and charming simplicity" of the Lithuanian national songs contain instruction for the poets of his time. In speaking of German historiography, he shows why it is that we have no good historians.

"Our *beaux esprits* are seldom scholars, and our scholars are seldom *beaux esprits*. The former are wholly unwilling to read, to investigate, to collect, in short, to work; the latter are unwilling to do anything else. The former lack material, and the latter lack skill in giving form to their material." Thus we see that with Lessing the art of moulding expression into beautiful form is everywhere invested with its rights equally with the substantial contents accumulated by the diligence of the investigator. Moreover, sentences like this — "that the name of a true historian belongs only to him who writes the history of his own times and

country" — reach into the innermost life of a truly national literature, the claims of which Lessing was the first to advocate.

So desirous is he to strengthen right judgment on literary matters, that he cannot pardon even a Leibnitz for having disparaged the intellectual abilities of his countrymen. Leibnitz had once affirmed that the only intellectual preëminence of the German lay in his industry. "Now let no one wonder any more," exclaims Lessing, "that Frenchmen are apt to depreciate German scholars, when the best German minds thus degrade their countrymen below the French, merely to acquire the reputation of politeness and good-breeding! But the French are too truly polite to be pleased with compliments made from disparagement of their neighbors." And precisely because Lessing was so anxious to elevate his nation, and give it a right to an honest pride in its own productions, was he very severe upon those writers who lacked that virtue of diligence; and he insisted, with Leibnitz, on thoroughness and learned criticism in the sciences, and on an erudition which always remembers that it cannot be an end in itself, but must fructify life by new creations. But while he unsparingly chastised all careless writers, he never forgot the justice due even to a Dusch, and gladly acknowledged that this author was capable of producing something good, if he would properly consult his powers, and confine himself to suitable subjects. He also took especial pains to give good advice to that one among the young German authors whose great endowments were visible to his keen eye, even in the midst of crudest errors, namely, Wieland.

Wieland, then twenty-three years of age, who resided

in Switzerland, and played the part there of Klopstock's successor, had ventured, in 1756, to declare the cheerful poems of Utz and others unchristian and immoral, and had invoked the ecclesiastical censure against such a scandal. Lessing shows him that he is by no means called to be the representative of Christianity. In a series of letters, full of inimitable keenness and excellent wit, he shows that Wieland lacks every qualification for such a vocation ; that his religion is only a poetical sentiment ; that he ignores dogmas and praises Shaftesbury, who is the most dangerous, because the acutest, adversary of religion ; and that he is still farther removed from sympathy with the Swiss tendency in literature, as he neither agrees with the views of that people nor understands their language. He rudely strips off the mantle of religious high-priestliness and seraphic transcendentalism with which the immature and unstable Wieland had draped himself and his muse. And when Wieland appeared, in 1759, with his tragedy of Lady Jane Grey, Lessing greeted it with these words : " Rejoice with me ! Herr Wieland has left the ethereal spheres, and wanders among the children of men ! " But this joy does not restrain him from exposing, with a truly delightful irony, not only the æsthetical weakness and immaturity of the play, but also a wholesale plagiarism from the Englishman Rowe — a plagiarism which the pious seraphic had conducted so recklessly, that in an episode of the English original, which Wieland omitted entirely, one of its characters, nevertheless, appeared in the German tragedy !

But in such merry pleasantry, earnestness is not forgotten. This poor production furnishes Lessing with an opportunity to discuss the relation of the poet to histor-

ical material, and to announce the important proposition that "the poet is lord of history." And although he had before declared that, under certain conditions, a youth can write a tragedy more easily than a comedy, yet he now wishes this to be understood, in general, only of first efforts, and impresses upon the young aspirant for the garland of the tragic muse that "tragedy is the work of a ripe manhood, and not of youth."

His friend Weisse's miserable tragedy of Edward the Second enables him to throw a penetrating ray of light on the lamentable condition of the German stage, and, at the same time, to make the finest observations on the wit of passion and of pain. Indeed, we find in the Letters on Literature that bold reference to the greatness of Shakespeare, in opposition to the French tragedy of Corneille, which was afterwards to receive its full development in the Hamburg Dramaturgy. But there were, above all, two objects in these letters which he never lost sight of—the æsthetico-religious perversity of the disciples of Klopstock, and the consequent arrogance of spirit displayed in the moralizing journals of that party. We have seen how heartily Lessing, in his *début* as a critic, welcomed Klopstock, as the only truly significant phenomenon of the German polite literature of that time. But as he was never blind to the faults of the singer of the Messiah, so he was not disposed to look on quietly as the Klopstockian lyric degenerated more and more into a sentimental pathos void of thought, which sought to help out its poetic poverty by brilliant religious coloring.

Lessing, who, from his very nature, had nothing so much at heart as the strict separation of intellectual provinces, was utterly opposed to the confounding of

poesy and dogmatics. He complained openly that orthodoxy was making a pedant of the poet Klopstock, who, in his verses, even transformed "fate" into "Providence," and the "muse" into a "songstress of Zion." He said boldly that Klopstock's spiritual songs, with their gorgeous tirades, were "so full of the poet's feeling that the reader does not feel at all." An admirer of Klopstock had called one of these songs rich in thought. "If that is rich in thought," replied Lessing, "I wonder much that this wealthy poet has not long since become the favorite of all old women!" He is willing to grant that Klopstock, when he composed his songs, may have been in a state of very lively emotion. "But because he sought merely to express these emotions, and concealed the depth of clear thoughts and conceptions, by means of which he had enkindled in himself the pious flame, it is impossible for his readers to raise themselves to his level." It was necessary, then, when Goethe was yet in short clothes, to point out, even to a Klopstock and his school, that the poet's state of subjective excitement, at the moment of creating, is rather an obstacle than an advantage to that which he creates.

But still more suspicious than the æsthetic was the moral perversity with which Klopstock and his disciples, in their journal, "The Northern Guardian" (*Der Nordische Aufseher*), put themselves forward as preachers of Christian morals. This journal was an imitation of the moralizing English weeklies,\* and was intended to serve its founders, Klopstock, Cramer, and Basedow, "in gradually diffusing specially Christian views among the people." One cannot help recalling how Klopstock,

\* See Hettner, *Liter. Gesch.* d. 18 Jahrh. I. 260-281.

twenty years later, took upon himself the office of conscience-keeper to Goethe and his prince, and how poorly his audacity prospered in that case.\* "The Northern Guardian" wished to extend its mission over all Germany. It had, in its first issue, begun with the arrogant, priestly proposition, "that without religion one cannot be an honest man." This was an offence against reason and humanity, which the great champion of both could by no means let go unpunished. Lessing exposes very freely the shallowness and obscurity, as well as presumption, of such an assertion. He shows that the poetico-religious extravagance which confounds thought with sentiment has here penetrated also into the prosaic treatment of simple questions; he even places himself upon the strictly theological stand-point, and from thence uncovers the nakedness of these weak disputants. The rage with which the assailed party turned against him, the abusive language with which one of them styled him "the abomination of the world," only increased Lessing's humor, and the weight of the blows by which he finally scourged these babblers out of the sanctuary of literature so effectually that he put an end, once for all, to the existence of the moral weeklies in Germany.

The "Letters" directed against the "Northern Guardian" are masterpieces of Lessing's polemics, whose dramatic power and caustic wit make their perusal still in the highest degree enjoyable, though Cramer and Basedow are long since forgotten, and only preserved in Lessing's writings like insects in the clear gold of amber.

\* Lewes, *Life of Goethe*, I. 359.



## CHAPTER III.

## LESSING'S FABLES. PHILOTAS. FAUST.

THE two most important labors of Lessing, which fall within the period of the Letters on Literature, are his occupation with the fable, and his tragedy *Philotas*. The theory of the Swiss, that the wonderful, united with the moral, in a practical application to man, constitutes the essence of the fable, had induced them to give the apologues of *Æsop* the preference above all other kinds of poems. "However strange," observes Goethe, in his *Autobiography*, "such an aberration may seem to us, yet it exerted the most decisive influence on the best minds. That Gellert, and afterwards *Lichtwehr*, devoted themselves to this department, that so many others directed their talent to it, that even Lessing himself attempted to labor in it, speaks for the confidence universally felt in this species of writing." However, Lessing's interest in the fable had still another and deeper ground. It was connected with his philological studies at *Leipsic*, and with the stimulus received through his teacher, *Christ*, and not less with the endeavor to bring back a favorite kind of poetry from the by-ways of recent elaborators to the highway of its classical head-master, *Æsop*. But his interest in this "common domain of poesy and morality" was not confined to the fable itself; but the fable

served him as a means of establishing certain general principles.\* Danzel characterizes this tendency in Lessing as a striving for simplicity, which he accomplishes by an adherence to antiquity; in other words, by developing his own opinions as the essence of an antique phenomenon. The Swiss, with Bodmer at their head, whose theory and practice in this province were utterly demolished by Lessing, assailed his labors with a bitterness of which a specimen is preserved in the Letters on Literature. But what interests us most in Lessing's treatises is, as before stated, the important principle which he develops. For herein he first declared that *the true poem, as such, must be its own end*. He renounces the moral theory of poetry by limiting didactics to the fable, and bases poetry wholly on the excitement of passion, and on the idea of pathos, as well as on the perfectly finished course of the "action," of which last property he was the first to unfold a correct idea. He exposes the errors of those writers on æsthetics "who associate with the word 'action' so narrow and material a conception, that they restrict it to movements in bodies and changes in space, whereas every inner conflict of passions, every result of the contest between different thoughts, is an action." He demonstrates that action in the fable, and action in the epic and drama, are two different things. The latter, he says, must have, besides the poet's design, a purpose pertaining to itself. The action in the fable does not need this inner aim, and it is sufficient if the poet attains by it his didactic purpose. The epic or the dramatic poet makes his chief end the excitement of the passions. But he cannot excite these excepting by imitated passions; and


\* Danzel, I. 414-434.

he cannot imitate the passions otherwise than by placing before them certain aims which they strive to approach or recede from. He must, therefore, put purposes in the action itself, and also know how to subordinate these purposes to a principal action, in order that different passions may subsist together; the fabulist, on the other hand, has nothing to do with our passions, but only with our perceptions. He wishes to give us a lively conviction of some one moral truth; and he seeks to attain his end according to the measure of truth by means of a representation to the senses of an action, which may or may not contain a separate purpose. So soon as his object is reached, it is a matter of indifference to him whether the fictitious action finds its own proper conclusion or not. Therefore the definite action — the inner and outer course of a human event — passing through a series of necessary and reasonable changes, and free from all moral didactic tendency, — this it is which Lessing presented in this treatise as the essence of that poesy which he recognized as the best and highest of all, namely, dramatic poetry. And as, with him, critical knowledge always went hand in hand with practical production, we see him at the same time attempting to reduce, not the fable only, but also the drama, to its essential elements. The tragedy of *Philotas* was the result of this attempt.

*Philotas*, a king's son, while yet scarcely more than a boy, is taken prisoner during the first battle in which he is permitted to take part. In despair at his fate, he sees throne and fatherland, for whose sake he had plunged enthusiastically into battle, now in danger by reason of his captivity, since his father will sacrifice

everything to free his only son. The thought darts through his mind that his death might be for the happiness of his country. Then suddenly the king, whose captive he is, announces to him that his son has also been taken prisoner by the soldiers of the enemy, and that he is resolved to propose an exchange to the father of Philotas. Philotas is to send a reliable messenger, in order that his father may receive assurance that his son still lives. Then arises anew, in the mind of the heroic youth, the thought of placing, by his own voluntary death, the advantage of the war in the hands of his father. He persuades his fellow-prisoner, Parmenio, a veteran warrior, who is to carry the message to his father, to delay the exchange for a single day; and with the sword of King Aridæus, which had been given the young prisoner at his own request, that he might not appear unarmed before the warriors, he pierces, in the presence of the king, his heart, which beat only for fatherland and honor.

Such are the contents of the piece, which, condensed into one act, with the unadorned prose of its language, with the simplicity of its motives, and the concentrated substance of its pathos, itself resembles a short Spartan sword. The action, also, in this play is short and sharp, like a sword-thrust; and it is just this brevity and concentration which Lessing intended to embody in the poem. His Philotas reduces the tragedy to its essential element, to pure "action," as that term had been defined in the researches relative to the fable. Hence the conciseness of the execution, the prosaic form, — which he had also applied in the fable for the same end of sharp presentation of the essential, — the manly antique limi-



tation to the simple pathos of love of honor and glory, as it stood before his eyes in the form and character of Kleist, and the avoidance of all allusion to the modern sentiment of sexual love.

Compared with the loquacious diffuseness and latitude of feeling in Miss Sara Sampson, this new piece was, as it were, cut from his own flesh. He obtained this brevity and perspicuity, which seemed to him the especial want of modern German poetry, by turning from the moralizing English writers to the ancients, from the diffuseness of Richardson to the simplicity of Sophocles, whose works he was then studying attentively, and whose life he had begun to write.

Lessing's *Philotas* was intended, also, as an example of that simplicity which appeared to him necessary for the founding of a national literature. He had become convinced, to use the words of Goethe, "that the first step towards extricating himself from the insipid, prolix, and worthless style of the period, was to learn definiteness, precision, and brevity of expression." And as his friend Kleist had preceded him in the drama with his tragedy of *Seneca*, so the heroic form of that splendid man, united with the martial spirit of those years of Prussian heroism, gave to Lessing pathos and manly sentiment for his own poetry. Indeed, it was well known that the great Prussian hero, in case of his captivity, had ready an expedient like that of the hero of Lessing's tragedy.

Finally, as regards the tragical motive itself, Lessing remained wholly true to it in the only tragedy which he composed after *Philotas*. For here, as in *Emilia Galotti*, it is the one-sided precipitancy of character

through whose passionate apprehension of the situation the issue is brought about. If any doubt were still possible as regards the purpose which Lessing pursued in the *Philotas*, it would be thoroughly scattered by an extremely comical mystification in which Lessing indulged towards his friend Gleim in relation to this subject. He sent the piece to Gleim as the production of an anonymous author, and Gleim was clumsy enough to fall into the trap. He at once went to work to alter the tragedy, and put it into iambics, and then sent the work, considerably "enlarged and improved," back to Lessing, who had sufficient good humor to publish this "versified" *Philotas* of the Prussian grenadier! Lessing's letters referring to the matter are models of the finest *persiflage*; and when Father Gleim perceived the great blunder which he had perpetrated, he knew not how to extricate himself from the difficulty, except by sending to "his Lessing" an anker of the best Rhine wine.

However, Lessing had the versified *Philotas* printed; and the only revenge which he took was, that on the title-page of the copy destined for Gleim, he changed the word "versified" into "verified."

It was action, then, which Lessing had asserted to be the essential thing in dramatic poetry, and of which he had given an extract (so to speak) in his *Philotas*. From this point of view he had, in his *Letters on Literature*, directed attention to Shakespeare, and affirmed of him that he approaches much nearer to the ancients than does Corneille, whose resemblance to them he confines to mechanical arrangement. His close study of those rude old puppet-plays (*Haupt-und Staatsaktionen*)—which Gottsched, out of favor to French taste, had

banished from the German stage—had strengthened him in the conviction that the German spirit inclines rather to the English than to the French style; “that we wish to see and think more in our tragedies than the timid French tragedies allow us to see and think; that the grand, the terrible, and the melancholy have a better influence upon us than the genteel, the tender, and the amorous.” It is well known how important and eventful this pointing to Shakspeare and to all the older English authors, by Lessing, has been, for the evolution of German literature. But he erred in utterly disowning the importance, and even necessity, of the French element for the development of the national drama, through his indignation at the insipidity of Gottsched and his school, and because his own early efforts, which he now regarded as failures, were based entirely on that element.\* “For strong minds are most relentless towards their own errors”—a truth to which we find corresponding testimony in the history of Goethe’s development, who, beginning with an enthusiasm in favor of Shakspeare, afterwards declare himself most warmly against this principal leaven of the Storm-and-Stress period, and even esteemed it needful and useful to return to the French element.

Lessing’s most important production, under the influence of Shakspeare, was his elaboration of the German Faust legend. In the Letters on Literature he adduced as a proof of the affinity of the German with the English drama the well-known play of Dr. Faust, “which has in it numerous scenes that only a Shakespearian genius would have been able to imagine.” On this

\* Danzel, I. 129–132, 447–450.

occasion he published the celebrated fragment of his own elaboration, in which Faust examines the seven devils as to their swiftness. Lessing had first seen this favorite play of the German people represented in 1753, in Schuch's booth on the Gens-d'armes Market-place at Berlin, and had been immediately incited to the dramatic arrangement of the same material. In 1758 it had so far progressed towards accomplishment that he could think of a speedy representation. But it never came. On the contrary, Lessing's labor on this theme extends through his whole life, and we find him still engaged with it at Breslau, Hamburg, and even at Wolfenbüttel. Meanwhile neither the observations scattered throughout his correspondence, nor the reports of two friends found in Lachmann's edition of his works, give us any satisfactory explanation of the manner in which he treated the subject. Only one important fact is thereby brought to light. Lessing wrote two Fausts : first, one in which he adhered to the old magic-and-devils fable ; and to this belong the existing fragments. Subsequently, however, he resolved to humanize the plot, and assign to a diabolical rascal the *rôle* of seducer of a pure, innocent man. The manuscript of this piece was irretrievably lost by an accident during Lessing's Italian tour. He congratulated himself especially upon the first of these dramatic renderings ; yet he was reproached, and not unjustly, by Madame Gottsched, that by his manner of treatment he had entirely lost the genuine German spirit of the old Faust legend.



## CHAPTER IV.

EXTERNAL CIRCUMSTANCES. DEPARTURE FROM  
BERLIN.

IN the midst of such labors as we have been considering, two years and a half had passed away. Lessing had again become domesticated at Berlin, and everything appeared to indicate that he would establish himself permanently in that city. His circumstances were now extremely pleasant. Besides Mendelssohn and Nicolai, with whom he was on terms of tenderest friendship, he had formed connections, more or less intimate, with all the distinguished men then living in Berlin. Social life was at that time entirely different from what it is in our punctilious days. The Scholar's Café, established in 1755, by Resewitz, and the Monday Club, which united all men of literary reputation, numbered Lessing among their members; and a smaller society, the Friday Club, consisting of the narrower circle of his particular friends, remained for a long time afterwards the object of his pleasantest recollections. Ramler was not only a sympathetic coöperator in many literary projects, but also a cheerful companion. "Baumann's Cave,"\* a wine-cellar in the vicinity of both their dwellings, often summoned them, with other

\* The name also of a famous cave, remarkable for its fantastic stalactitic and stalagmitic formations, near Rübeland, in the Hartz Mountains.  
—TRANS.

associates, to joyful Socratic symposia; and many a time may have resounded, in the subterranean apartments, one of those popular drinking songs of Lessing, such as the following, so full of the genuine and joyous spirit of youth and wine:—

“Ho, friends! it thunders! What care we?

Fill up the bowl—to pleasure drink!

Let timorous sinners bend the knee,

Let sober fools and women shrink.

It thunders! Drain your glasses dry,

Nor tremble at the storm divine:

Great Jove may lash the billows high—

He will not strike our crimson wine!”

“I can call, or at least make signs to, Herr Lessing,” writes Ramler to Gleim (April 11, 1759), “when I wish to drink your health with him. We hang out a red ribbon—that is the signal for retreating into ‘Baumann’s Cave;’ for you must know the cellarist’s name is Baumann.” There was also no want of intercourse with acquaintances of all kinds; and among the numerous names which are mentioned in Lessing’s correspondence, we find those of amiable and distinguished women, such as the talented painters Frau von Gac and Madame Theerbusch. Music was represented in the circle by Quanz, Krause, and Kirnberger; and thus the different elements of many-sided incentive were offered to Lessing, while he charmed all around him by the wealth of his intellect and the vivacity of his conversation. It was this period of his third residence in Berlin that his friends remembered with delight all their lives long. Lessing was then in his thirtieth year, in the prime of manly youth, in the full con-

sciousness of mature power and distinguished success. His name was known throughout and beyond Germany, and his place upon the summit of literary fame was undisputed. Indeed, he had already attained a height where he began to feel solitary in the midst of friends; and where, in reference to so many experiences, to Gleim's treatment of his *Philotas*, and the critical efforts of his associates in the Library of Sciences, he could say of himself, —

“Alas! when I erred, I had many companions;  
Since I know the truth, I am alone!”

Besides, however invigorating to intellectual interests may have been the elevated feeling of the Prussian capital, and the patriotic enthusiasm called forth by the glorious successes of the first years of the great war, these were the cause of manifold conflicts between Lessing and even his nearest friends. We have already seen how he was obliged to contend with Gleim, in whose war-songs “the patriot, and even the soldier, often outsang the poet.” This one-sided military patriotism, which “every day vented itself in a thousand extravagant remarks,” was too offensive to Lessing's nature not to challenge him to opposition. As he had been deemed “a mad Prussian” at Leipsic, in the land of his birth, so at Berlin he was regarded as a mad Saxon. Father Gleim was most painfully surprised at reading these terrible words in a letter of his Lessing: “According to my mode of thinking, the reputation of a zealous patriot is the very last that I would covet; that is, of a patriot who teaches me to forget that I am a citizen of the world.” Indeed, to Lessing such patri-

otism was at best, as he expresses himself, "an heroic infirmity which he was quite willing to dispense with." It seemed to him that the war, whose terrors then desolated Germany, was, in the most favorable view, "a bloody process among independent heads;" which in these more civilized times has, at least, this good, that it leaves all other classes undisturbed, and exerts no influence on the sciences farther than to awaken new Xenophons and Polybiuses. The sanguinary broil about a province had nothing inspiring for him; and his impartial eye was not blinded as to the nature of the "patriotic army," which consisted almost wholly of mercenaries, captured Austrians, and disguised Saxons. Berlin, too, was becoming more and more unquiet. As early as September, 1760, Lessing writes to his father, to excuse himself from taking charge of his brother Gottlob, "Events might happen which would make this city an unsafe place, and force me to leave it." This fear was not groundless. The Russians, who, as early as 1757, had visited Berlin, entered it again three years later, on the 9th of October, 1760, under Tottleben and Lacy. It is true that the severest evils had been warded off by the patriotic citizens; whose devotion recalled the noblest examples of antiquity, though it passed unrewarded by Frederic the Great.\* But Lessing had seen how his successor in the editorship of Voss's newspaper, together with the editor of Spener's newspaper, who had expressed themselves with Gleim-like freedom about the invading generals, were made by the Russians to run the gantlet on New Market, to be stripped, and finally pardoned after a few

\* Preusz, Friedrich der Grosse, II. 259.

blows. Such occurrences contributed to render Lessing's stay in Berlin disagreeable. With these were associated two other motives for a change: the increasing intellectual estrangement from those who had hitherto been his companions, and the old, unconquerable desire for a wider knowledge of life and the world. With regard to the first of these motives, Lessing had now struggled up to a stand-point where a sincere co-operation with his Berlin friends was no longer possible. Besides, his superiority was at times uncomfortable and burdensome to them. In Lessing and his friends was fulfilled the old Horatian verse concerning the pressure which the superior mind involuntarily exercises upon lesser talents:—

“Urit enim fulgore suo qui prægravit artes  
Infra se positas.\*

Gleim had taken it ill because Lessing, in his fables, and in his treatise on this kind of poetry, had disparaged Lafontaine, to whom Gleim had attached himself as a disciple. Ramler was no less angry because the French æsthetical writer Batteux, whom he had translated, had had met with severe criticism; and both he and Nicolai were dissatisfied that Lessing, instead of forming with them and their friends a literary *coterie* of their own, retired more and more within himself; and used the decisions which they expressed in their journal only to correct them, and to form starting-points for his own critical investigations. They felt oppressed by him; and could not be satisfied, because they did not recognize in his writings the same easy, accommodating,

\* For he burns by his splendor who weighs down inferior talents.

good-natured fellow that he showed himself to be in personal intercourse. Especially significant in this respect is a letter written by Ramler to Gleim a year before Lessing left Berlin.\* Lessing was described in it as a man "who assails the whole world;" and who, in his judgment on the French æsthetical writer Batteux, paid no regard to the fact that "a friend"—Ramler himself—had translated this author; in short, as a writer who wishes to trample down all around him in order to put himself in the foreground. "I know," he writes, "that Herr Lessing wishes to tell his own opinion, and by *crushing other writers to give air and make room for himself*. This disposition is not to be overcome. He cannot possibly be in his writings the mild, considerate, jovial companion that he is in society;" after which follows the lamentation, "It is a pity that this is so; however, Lessing is now too old to conquer these bad qualities, and we must therefore hold fast to the good ones."

And just what Ramler and his party called his bad qualities, was a great and noble trait in the character of this splendid man; who in personal intercourse was indeed willing to live and let live, but in the province of the intellect would not yield a hair's breadth, in the cause of truth and science, even to his dearest friends.

Such attempts at conversion and expectations of change may have been brought to bear upon him many times during his Berlin life; and Ramler probably knew what Lessing meant, when, in his first letter from Breslau, he honestly confessed that he was satiated with Berlin, and believed that his friends must also have had enough of him.

\* Quoted by Danzel, I. 463.

The second circumstance that impelled him to a change of residence was of a more external kind. He had passed his thirtieth year, and was still, as he says, "the old bird on the roof." The new metropolis of the Muses on the Spree had still no place for him. That, in spite of his love of independence, and his dislike "to become the slave of an office," he would have accepted gladly a permanent situation in Berlin, he confessed in a letter to his father. But it was contrary to his self-respect to sue anxiously for it. And yet he felt the necessity of procuring, by the sacrifice of a few years, the means for more independent study in the future. Such a plan agreed very well with his manner of thinking. When a youth of twenty years, he explained on this principle a certain episode in the life of the Roman poet Plautus, wherein it appears that the latter gave up poetizing for a time, and engaged in commercial business.

The journey with Winkler, which promised to give the desired freedom, had miscarried; and there lay a bitter earnestness in the jesting tone which he at that time employed in writing to Ramler, saying that he and the King of Prussia had a great account to settle with each other; for since it was entirely owing to the king that his plan of seeing the world had been overthrown, it was only just that his majesty should give him a pension sufficient to enable him to forget the world. "You think that he will let that part alone! I think so too; and in revenge I will wish for him that only bad verses may be composed on his victories."

For four years he had led the old literary life, limited to books, studies, and authorship; and he felt that

a pause of some kind was necessary; "that it is time to live again more among men, and less among books." His health, too, had suffered from the persistent study and sedentary habits of a writer.\* Since his friends could do nothing to procure for him a position free from care, he tried to help himself. He wished to earn money in order to collect a library after his own taste, and to be able to work a few years in peace. Rumors were current that he had accepted a Quartermaster's situation in the regiment of his friend Kleist; and in Leipsic it was even said that he had enlisted as an officer in a volunteer battalion. Much complaint has been made of Lessing's inconstancy and restlessness, which rendered it impossible for him to remain long in one place. By a little closer observation, however, it will be seen that up to the moment when the man of forty years received a permanent appointment at Wolfenbüttel, no attempt had been made to secure him in any worthy position; and it is plain that this fact, quite as much as his love of freedom, contributed to cause his manifold removals, which were all brought about, more or less, by inner or outer necessity. In this respect he had once called himself, in his poems, "a light football of fate," and complained that his merit had never been acknowledged in the offer of "a remunerative situation."

Whilst living with Kleist at Leipsic, Lessing had become acquainted with Colonel Tauentzien. This man, who, in 1760, as governor of Breslau, was obliged to carry on numerous administrative affairs, and among others, the complicated and dubious mint-operations of King Frederic, needed a capable and

\* Klose, in K. Lessing, I. 241.



trustworthy assistant in this labor. He remembered Kleist's friend, and offered Lessing the place of government secretary under himself, with the most favorable external conditions. Lessing had no hesitation in accepting the offer. Without saying a word to his friends, without even informing his landlord that he had no further use for his rooms, he disappeared from Berlin, and went to Breslau in November, 1760.

"I wish," he wrote at that time in his diary, "to spin myself in for a time like an ugly worm, in order to come to light again like a brilliant butterfly."

GOTTHOLD EPHRAIM LESSING.

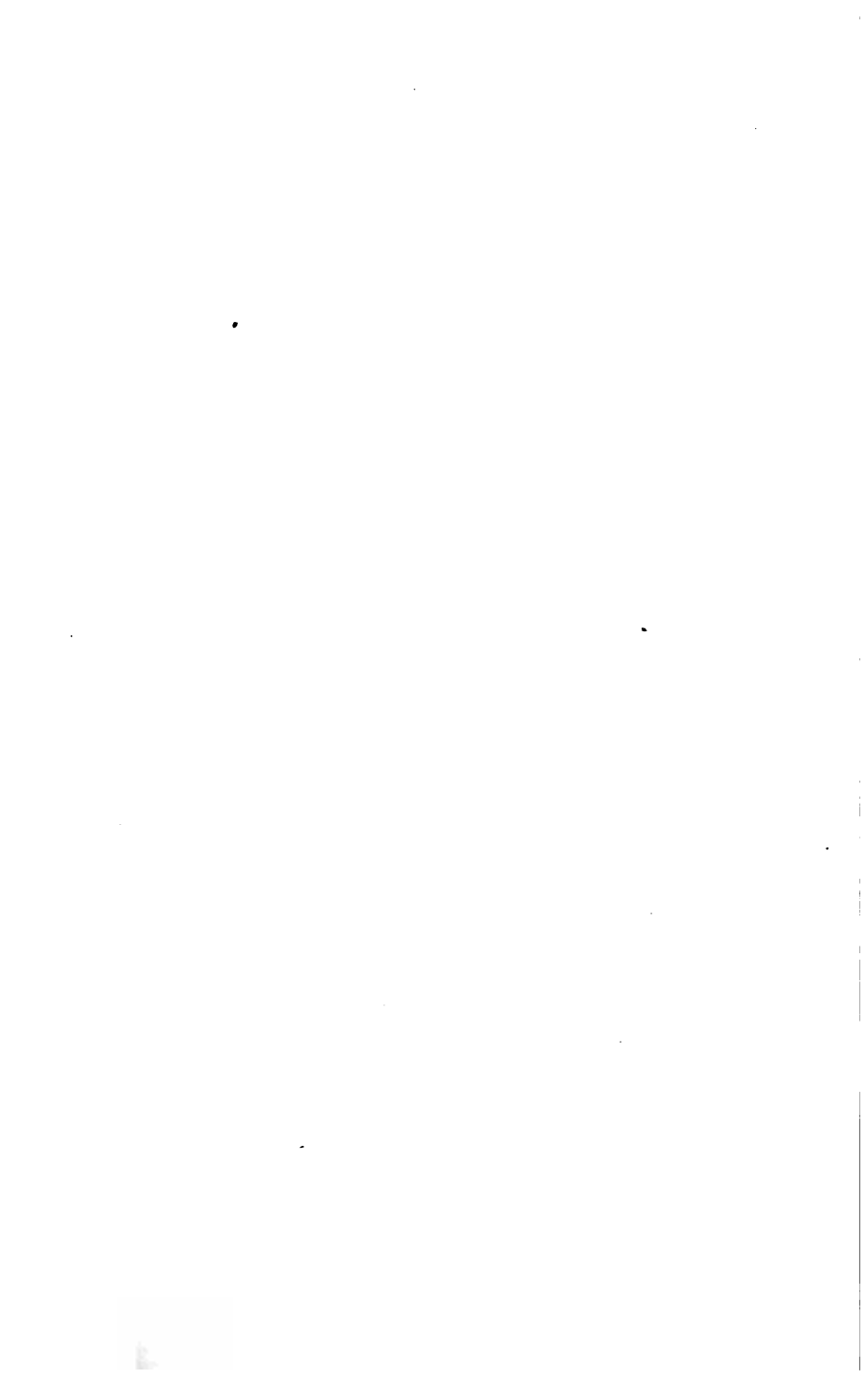
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BOOK FIFTH.

WAR-LIFE AND WORLD-LIFE AT BRESLAU —  
MINNA VON BARNHELM.

1760 — 1765.

( 211 )



## CHAPTER I.

### EXTERNAL CIRCUMSTANCES.

**L**ESSING arrived at Breslau towards the close of November, 1760. On the way he had spent one day in Frankfort, to visit the grave of his beloved Kleist.\* "The history of this pilgrimage deserves a special letter; you shall have it very soon," he wrote to Ramler in the first letter addressed to this friend from Breslau. He never wrote that letter! In general, the correspondence of Lessing with his friends during these five years at Breslau has come down to us in an extremely fragmentary condition. Of the letters of this period there have been preserved only nineteen from himself,† and eight from his friends to him, seven of which are from Mendelssohn, and one from Nicolai. Ramler's letters are entirely wanting; and this is the more to be regretted, since the confidence between them was at that time complete; and the trace of a personal implication of Lessing with a woman, which relation was broken off by his removal from Berlin, is no longer possible to be made plain, on account of the loss of Ramler's letters.

\* Frankfort on the Oder is here meant. In the park (formerly a church-yard), on the south side of the city, stands a monument to Kleist, erected by the Freemasons. — TRANS.

† Seven to Ramler, three to Mendelssohn, two to Nicolai, six to his own father, and one to Heyne.

Immediately after Lessing's departure, the Berlin Gazette announced that the Academy of Sciences of that city had, besides several other scholars, appointed "Herr Lessing, who has already made himself honorably known by his writings," its foreign member. But if even Lessing's friends felt themselves injured by the impudent appendix to the proclamation setting forth that this honor had been conferred on all the successful candidates at their repeated solicitation, it may easily be imagined that he himself regarded his appointment as an insult, rather than an honor. He refrained, therefore, from informing even his father, to whom the fact would have given the greatest joy. It is interesting to know that his name was proposed by an enlightened theologian, the Provost Süszmilch; while the æsthetical writer Sulzer, who on other occasions had been so extremely fond of appearing as Lessing's patron, spoke warmly against his admission. Officious persons hastened to inform Lessing of the conduct of this "false" friend. His answer was—an excuse for Sulzer, in which he characterized as inconsistency what others branded as treachery.

Lessing's chief, General von Tauentzien, had about this time won high military fame, and the most grateful acknowledgment of his king, by his heroic defence of the capital of Silesia against an enemy superior in numbers. The rough, humorous response still lived in everybody's mouth, which he gave to the Austrian General Loudon when the latter had summoned him to surrender the city, with the threat that in case of refusal he would not spare even the child in the womb. "I am not pregnant, nor my soldiers either!" he had replied to the

Austrian ; and at the same time solemnly pledged his word, together with the officers of his corps, to perish to the last man rather than surrender to the enemy. His was one of those strong, capable natures, which, without any scientific culture whatever, instinctively recognizes and respects kindred power in others ; and Lessing was just the man to prize duly such an heroic warrior. The understanding between them, therefore, was, from the beginning to the end of their association, the very best ; and even ten years afterwards, Lessing, in a letter to his brother, referred with affection to his "honest old Tauentzien," whose attachment to Frederic the Great he characterized by the well-known words, "If the king had been so unfortunate as to be able to collect his whole army under one tree, Tauentzien would certainly have stood among them." As a reward for the services of this brave general, Frederic had made him governor of the so heroically defended Silesian capital, and at the same time director-general of the mint. What the latter title signified is understood when one remembers the frequent adulterations of the coin to which Frederic was forced by the necessities of war. By the repetition of those depreciating operations, "good money" at length rose so immensely in price that a ducat was often equivalent to nine thalers.\* Of course it was not only the Jews, Ephraim, Itzig, &c. (whom Frederic employed to carry out these operations), who profited by them ; Christians also were not slow in drawing from this convenient source ; and even Tauentzien, who was originally poor, had accumulated, as Frederic the Great testifies, a property of at least one hundred and fifty thousand

\* Preusz, II. 391.

thalers.\* Only Lessing, who had placed himself under the long-dreaded yoke of official dependence for the express purpose of bettering his circumstances, and to whom his position gave the best possible chance of using its advantages without dishonesty, could not prevail upon himself to employ the opportunity. Since he, as the right hand of Tauentzien, had always the first knowledge of new mint-operations, it would have been easy for him to have acquired thousands by means of safe speculations, if, as his brother writes, he had only cared as much about the new issues of money as about new and old issues of books. He did not do it, because all such transactions were opposed to his pure nature and scrupulous honesty; and so it happened that, after five years, he came out of relations in which a Voltaire would have acquired hundreds of thousands, as poor as when he entered into them.

The only important possession which he obtained in Breslau was an excellent library, to the purchase of which he applied a great part of his income. It was, as his brother says, at once speculation and amateurship. "Books were sold, at that time, in bad money almost cheaper than at other times in good money; and he knew that he could keep books more easily than money, which latter the first beggar he met drew from him by lamentations."† What besides might have remained to him of his pecuniary earnings was consumed by the family. Lessing suffered his whole life long under this heavy burden, and never more than when his generous heart was compelled to set limits to

\* Preusz, III. 63.

† Karl Lessing, I. 225.

the unceasing claims made upon him by his parents and brothers and sisters. It was strange enough that the son whose course of life corresponded least of all to the desires of his parents, and whom they had often regarded as a prodigal, was the one to whom they constantly turned in their material embarrassments. This had been the case at an earlier period, whilst he was still living from hand to mouth, and had, as his brother relates, "often been obliged to borrow, in order to help his parents and the rest of his family." Now that they regarded him as a Cræsus, their demands increased in a measure unbearable even for Lessing. His letters show what exertions he made, and what sacrifices he bore, in order to satisfy them. But his power did not suffice. Now he was to take entirely on his hands one brother, or even two ; again, he was expected to pay the tuition or the university debts of one or the other ; and before he was aware of it, he was encumbered with a younger brother, in order to make more sure the desired support. The parents, on whom he bestowed the most liberal presents in money, importuned him constantly. They even demanded that he should remain in his situation for their sakes, in order that all the sons of the pastor primarius could, if possible, "study" at his expense ; and it needed the energy of a Lessing, and the consciousness of his great life-mission, to enable him, with his magnanimity and generosity of heart, to resist these unreasonable demands.

His Berlin friends, also, were dissatisfied with him. They deemed this turning to a practical vocation as a lamentable waste of time ; and Lessing's own complaints, which he sometimes allowed himself to make



in his letters, strengthened them in this view. He was, indeed, at first often in despair at the wearisome dullness of his occupations; at the dissipating war-life and world-life in which he was placed; at the "whirlpool of vapid social pleasures" in which he found himself engulfed. "Alas, dearest friend!" he writes to Mendelssohn, four months after his arrival at Breslau, "your Lessing is lost! In a year you will no longer know him, nor he himself. O, my time, my time, my all! to sacrifice it so entirely for I know not what purposes! A hundred times already I have thought of forcibly tearing myself from this engagement. And yet, can *one* rash action be made good by *another*?" To such isolated outbursts his Berlin friends attached great importance. They did not consider that Lessing's sanguine temperament required the relief of these occasional effusions, the nature of which he fully understood. Thus he himself appends to these complaining words the immediate corrective, "But perhaps this is only a dark day, in which nothing shows itself to me in its true light. To-morrow I shall write more cheerfully, perhaps." It is certain that he who declared repentance to be "the most useless of all unpleasant emotions" by no means gave himself over permanently to regret for the step he had taken; and that, all things considered, he had no reason to do so. For the five years of his life at Breslau were of the greatest importance to his whole after development, although during that period he seemed to have disappeared from the literary arena.

This interval of freedom from anxiety as to his daily bread, of ability to devote his hours of leisure

to poetical labors and scientific studies, without being forced to bring immediately to market, and convert into money, the result of his thought, was an inestimable advantage to the man who had never before enjoyed such liberty. And the two principal works created at this time, *Laokoön* and *Minna von Barnhelm*, bore unmistakable marks of his cheerful state of mind. His Berlin friends, whose view was always restricted by an exclusively literary life, and who, besides, heard from him occasional regrets at his separation from Berlin, saw only the outside of the new circumstances into which he had plunged without even asking their advice. They heard that he lived in a round of social diversions, took part in many a merry carousal of military companions, and spent his evenings at the theatre or the faro-table. They felt it severely that he gave up his participation in the *Letters on Literature*, which they did not feel competent to continue without him; and that in general he was becoming wholly estranged from their literary interests. They saw, too, that he lost sight of the material advantages of his new career; that he at least collected no treasures, although *Ramler* offered to become his "treasurer." On the contrary, he applied his means extravagantly to the purchase of books, in which they were obliged to help him, and in relation to which his careless absence of mind sometimes produced the most vexatious and expensive perplexities; as, for instance, when at book auctions he gave unlimited power to each of his friends with regard to one and the same work, to buy it for him at any price.\*

\* Compare Nicolai's remarks on the subject.

They saw him overwhelmed with official business, involved in the military and administrative affairs of his chief, and in various commercial transactions, and were therefore disposed to consider him as lost to his proper life-mission. Lessing fared at the hands of his friends just as Goethe afterwards did, in reference to the first ten years of his world, court, and business life at Weimar. The advantages of his new position, its important influence on his many-sided culture, remained hidden to his friends, as did also the results of the quiet diligence with which, in spite of the stress of business, he continued restlessly to labor in the accomplishment of his true calling. But we who have come after him, and survey the complete works of this great man, cannot but be astonished when we contemplate these results. He himself bears witness, that during the three and a half years of his stay in Breslau, he surpassed himself in the industry of his labor. And we can easily believe him. For, in the midst of the distractions of military and public life, he studied thoroughly the theory of Spinoza, and attained thereby the maturity of his philosophical culture. He began the study of the church fathers for a scientific knowledge of the earliest development of the Christian church; he projected and completed *Laokoön*, the pride of Germany's æsthetical literature; and finally created that masterpiece of its modern national poetry, *Minna von Barnhelm*. Even at the present day the place is pointed out at Breslau, in the garden on the Bürgerwerder, where, in the cheerful hours of a spring morning, he composed the sketch of *Minna*. Other traditions of his residence have also been preserved. The house

in *Junkerstrasse* (No. 2), formerly the Government House, is known as Lessing's abode; as well as another on the *Schuhbrücke*, called the Post-horn, where he spent many of his evenings in jovial society. It is yet related how the landlord of another house, in which Lessing dwelt for a long time, a gingerbread baker by trade, who was not well pleased with his tenant's frequent late return home, gave vent to his anger by making and selling among his wares a gingerbread figure representing a night-watchman, with the inscription, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. But we have yet to announce that the city in which Lessing created his *Minna von Barnhelm* has remembered the honor which unites the name of the illustrious author with its own, by any monument, or even memorial tablet.\*

The judgment which Goethe in *Truth and Poetry* pronounces on the Breslau period of Lessing's life is well known. "Lessing," he says, "who, in opposition to Klopstock and Gleim, was fond of casting off personal dignity because he was confident that he could resume it at any time, delighted at that period to lead a dissipated life in taverns and the world; since he needed constantly a strong counterpoise to his powerfully laborious soul, and had for this reason joined the suite of General Tauentzien." That Lessing *delighted* in such a dissipated life there is no evidence; rather the contrary is to be read in all his letters. It is more correct to say that he knew how, in the best sense, to

\* We learn that preliminary arrangements to this end have now (1861) been made on the occasion of a poem by Dr. S. Meyer, composed for the celebration of Lessing's birthday, and publicly delivered on the 2d of January, 1861, as a prologue to the representation of *Minna von Barnhelm*.

make a virtue of necessity, and that precisely on that account the new life into which he had plunged from forcible external reasons, and out of which he often enough longed to return to his studies, contributed to the essential advancement of his whole nature. During his residence at Leipsic he acquired a fondness for the society of officers, and the exclusively military circles which he frequented at Breslau made him by degrees acquainted with all the most important men of the army of Frederic the Great. As a confidential friend of one of the ablest generals, whose extensive sphere of activity his position obliged him to survey, he learned to know the relations of the world and of life on an incomparably grander scale than had been possible in his former literary career. His spirit, hitherto unaccustomed to restraint, here first learned to adapt itself to fixed rules; and the consciousness of being sufficient for business activities, so far removed from his earlier pursuits, increased his confidence in his own powers. His desire to become acquainted with men of the most varied classes and callings, which he was here able to gratify in an extended degree, sharpened his insight and enlarged his knowledge of character. In this way he made studies for Minna von Barnhelm, and for the transition of German poetry into the sphere of actualities.

Nor were more exact studies neglected. Two learned schoolmen, Arletius and Klose, formed his scientific society in Breslau. With the latter he diligently explored the libraries and cloisters of the city, and we have already seen that he appropriated large sums to the purchase of a valuable collection of books. He also remained in constant connection with the theatre.

The popular farces, harlequinades, and other similar representations of Franz Schuch's troupe, found in him an interested spectator; since, according to his own confession, he "would rather see a brisk healthy farce than a lame and sickly tragedy after the correct tediousness of Gottsched."

In this respect he was not very select. "The severest connoisseur," he says in his common-place book, "is not so severe amidst the crowd as when he is alone. For when he sees that this or that thing impresses this or that man, he forgets that it ought not to exert such influence. And if the piece does not please *him*, he is yet gratified to see that so many can derive pleasure from a mediocre production. At least such has been my experience in a hundred miserable buffooneries and very ordinary tragedies." The actor Brandes was helped in many ways by him, whilst this renewed connection with the living stage turned his attention again to his dramatic labors. Besides Minna von Barnhelm, he was occupied at this period with his poem of Faust, and the sketch of the tragedy of Alcibiades, as we are informed by Klose.\*

The above-mentioned Rector Klose describes Lessing's manner of life in Breslau somewhat as follows: The forenoon was devoted to his official business, after which he generally dined with his chief. At about four o'clock he sometimes went either to a bookstore or an auction, but usually to his own house, where, in an audience, he discharged the numerous personal affairs of various petitioners, in order to devote the rest of his time to study, or to literary conversations

\* Karl Lessing, I. 243.

with particular friends. About seven o'clock he was in the habit of going to the theatre, and from thence, generally without having heard the conclusion of the piece, to the gaming-house, where he staid till a late hour. Lessing's love of gaming, which began at this period, disquieted not only his friends at Berlin, of whom Mendelssohn especially visited him with fatherly admonitions; his chief also, to whose ears came rumors of his high faro-playing, once remonstrated with him in a friendly manner. Lessing replied that it was all the same whether one played for great or small stakes, and that high playing had the advantage of preserving the attention, whereas petty gaming easily dissipated it. Here we may recall Goethe's remark, that Lessing needed a strong counterpoise to his laborious intellect. Gaming furnished him this counterpoise. It, more completely than any other diversion, drew him away from his thoughts, and gave him the repose which he needed after severe mental exertion. He regarded it as a salutary gymnastic exercise for the body also. He asserted that the passionate attention which he gave to the faro-table, where, even when successful, he worked literally "in the sweat of his face," set his clogged machine in motion, brought the stagnant juices into circulation, and freed him from a physical oppression which often troubled him. "If I were obliged to play coolly," he added, "I would rather not play at all." The fact is, that he remained devoted to gaming till he removed to Wolfenbüttel, and that in Hamburg especially he gave more attention to it than was profitable to his finances. Yet it is not known that he ever thereby brought himself into embarrassments and

debts. Although he afterwards gave up cards, he continued loto-playing to the time of his death.

In the summer and autumn of 1762 he accompanied his general to the camp at Schweidnitz. There is still preserved a series of letters belonging to this period,\* which give interesting particulars as to his official activity; also amongst them is one of the most cheerful letters that Lessing ever wrote. The siege, which extended from the beginning of July into October, ended on the 9th of October by the surrender of the fortress. Five months afterwards it was assigned to him, in his capacity of government secretary at Breslau, to proclaim publicly, and with great solemnity, as herald of peace, the treaty concluded at Hubertsburg. In the summer of 1763 he accompanied his general to Potsdam, to the king, from whence he paid a short visit to his Berlin friends. During this sojourn at Potsdam, Tauentzien was appointed governor of the entire province of Silesia, and Lessing returned with him to Breslau, where, now freed from, or at least relieved in, his many occupations, he continued his own labors so eagerly that the excessive exertion threw him into a dangerous sickness during the summer of 1764. It was an inflammatory fever, which had long before shown symptoms of its approach by physical uneasiness, and when it was overcome, left behind an unwonted tension and excitability of the nerves.

He himself regarded this first severe sickness, which his body, hitherto defying all fatigue, had to endure, as a turning-point in his life. During convalescence he wrote to Ramler (August 5, 1764), who, like all

\* Recently discovered by Guhrauer. See Guhrauer, I. 299-302.



his Berlin friends, had almost given him up for lost, "A thousand thanks for your solicitous friendship! Sick I may have been indeed, but I shall not die yet, for all that. I am pretty well recovered, except that I am frequently troubled with dizziness. I hope that this will also soon pass away, and then I shall be as new born. All changes of our temperament, I believe, are connected with the processes of our animal economy. The crisis of my life approaches. I begin to be a man, and flatter myself that in this burning fever I have raved away the last trace of my youthful follies. Fortunate sickness! In your affection you wish me to be healthy; but ought poets to wish for robust health? Might not a certain degree of sickliness be far more stimulating to the imagination and the emotions? The Horaces and the Ramlers dwell in feeble bodies; the healthy Theophiluses \* and Lessings become gamesters and tipplers. Wish me healthy, therefore, dear friend; but, if possible, healthy with a slight memento, a thorn in the flesh, which shall make the poet feel from time to time the frailty of man, and realize that not all *tragici* become ninety years of age, like Sophocles; or, even if this were possible, that Sophocles wrote also about ninety tragedies, while I have written only one! Ninety tragedies! A dizziness comes over me!"

If, in an hour of depression, Lessing subsequently disclaimed the title of poet, we see that here, at least, he brings prominently forward his poetic calling, and especially his vocation as a dramatic poet. In fact, he was just at this time in the best frame of mind for

\* He refers to the stage-director, Theophilus Döbbelin.

dramatic production ; and the debility consequent upon his sickness, which had interrupted his literary activity, was therefore the harder for him to bear. "This sickness," he writes in his next letter to Ramler, "is worse than sickness. It is an irksome life when one is up and vegetates, and is regarded as well without being so. Before my illness I was in an unusual mood for work. I cannot return to it, try as hard as I may. I am exceedingly desirous to put a finishing touch to my *Minna von Barnhelm* ; but still I would not like to labor at it with only half a head. I have not been able to say anything to you of this comedy, because it is really one of my last projects. If it does not prove to be better than all the rest of my pieces, I am determined to have nothing more to do with the theatre." The close self-criticism of his former labors, which is implied in the last expression, is significant for the new stand-point of his dramatic insight.

It was a comical revenge of fortune that the physician who attended him during his sickness was a zealous admirer of Gottsched, and entertained his patient with lengthy eulogiums of that writer, which proved more tormenting than the paroxysms of fever. More interesting, however, is another characteristic which has come down to us out of this period of sickness. When the malady had reached its height, the physician found him lying quiet, with a significant expression upon his face. This look so struck his friend that he asked him confidentially what he was thinking of. "I am only curious to know what will happen in my soul while I am dying," replied the patient. When the physician sought to convince him that it is impossible to trace this change, he

exclaimed abruptly, "You are intriguing me!" Very beautifully has Danzel observed in this connection,\* "As even in the face of death he did not cease to watch for the spiritual process, in accordance with the fundamental principle of his organization, which was always directed towards the investigation of mental activity, so he not only lived freely the most tumultuous life, but at the same time knew how to catch it in the golden mirror of poetic reflection. And the golden mirror of his Breslau experience is Minna von Barnhelm."

\* Danzel, I. 470.

## CHAPTER II.

## MINNA VON BARNHELM.

MUCH has been said of the influence exerted upon Lessing and his *Minna von Barnhelm* by the writings of Diderot. But Madame de Staël hit the truth in her observation, "Lessing's opinions concerning the dramatic art agreed, in general, with those of Diderot. . . . But Diderot, in his productions, put the affectation of the natural in place of the affectation of the conventional; while the talent of Lessing is truly simple and sincere." In other words, Lessing is a simplified Diderot, who, as Hegel expresses himself, in the maturity of observation and culture turned away from the conventional rhetoric of theatrical language and emotion, to that naturalness which Goethe and Schiller also afterwards adopted in their earliest dramatic works. The return to nature, to the language of the heart, was the creative thought of the second half of the eighteenth century, which led the poor schoolmaster Winckelmann from the moors of Brandenburg to satisfy his longing soul with antique beauty beneath southern skies; which inspired Herder, in the solitude of his study at Riga, and enkindled its fire in the heart of the Westphalian jurist Moeser, buried in legal documents. And it was this same thought which found its mightiest interpreter in Lessing, in the midst of the confusion of a war-camp,

the excitement of the faro-table, the hardships of public service, and the wearisome squabbles of scholars.\*

Diderot had first suggested that the earnest, if not the tragical, conflicts of honorable characters in the relations of common life, were a rich, and, as yet, unexplored mine of tragic poetry. *L'honnête*, which he so earnestly recommended to the attention of dramatic poets, because it takes hold of the sympathy of the reader and the spectator not less, yea, even more, strongly than the ludicrous, — this, for us, untranslatable *honestum* of the Roman moralists, is then, in fact, the vital nucleus of Lessing's new poetry. But whilst Diderot's earnest comedy is essentially pathetic, Lessing's *Minna von Barnhelm* gives us the free, natural reflection of real life. With this production German literature developed an entirely new genus, which could not be classed under any of the former categories of dramatic poetry, because, standing between comedy and tragedy, it borrowed certain features and colors from both. His contemporaries felt this truth when they gave the piece the title of "The Generous Lovers" (*Die Grozmüthigen*), under which name it was even translated, or rather mutilated, into French, and repeatedly represented with great applause at Paris, where recently George Sand has appeared with her *Maître Favilla* — a genuine offshoot of this tendency, though distorted by French romanticism.† In Germany the tone of the age was then favorable to such developments. Weisse did not find enough generosity in the *Minna* of his friend, and made propositions

\* Compare Justus Moeser, by F. Kreyssig, 145. On Lessing's relation to Diderot, see Hettner, II. 330-332.

† Compare Stahr's *Nach fünf Jahren*, I. 194-204.

as to how this defect could be remedied! It is interesting to know that the piece, in its mutilated French form, found its way back to Germany, where Lessing's brother, to his vexation, saw "Les Amans genereux de M. Lessing" represented at Berlin.

Minna von Barnhelm is the first national comedy, and, to tell the truth, it remains the only one to this day. For where in German literature is there such a drama, which, not reverting to a remote past, but connecting itself with the immediate realities that surrounded the poet, and presenting the most important event and the most celebrated hero and sovereign of the century in its combinations, reflected the genuine German life and character with admirable clearness and simplicity, and while keeping the great representative of his time in the distance which respect and reverence prompted, yet frankly glorified his greatness and power, and above all his noble justice? Goethe, free from envy, like all the greatest geniuses, has, once for all, characterized this work as "the first production of the German mind of local and contemporary interest, which, on that account, wielded an immense influence." He himself had formed his juvenile dramatic attempts after this piece; he had in those beginnings disciplined himself in the wonderful mastery of representation; and still the gray-haired man loved to tarry "by the charming *naïveté* and cheerfulness, the genuine German nature, and the liberal knowledge of the world reflected in this piece, which, in those obscure times when it first appeared, looked like a brilliant meteor, and produced a remarkable effect on the aspiring youth of that period." Although Goethe, in one instance, seems to censure the "lingering scenes in the third act, where the Sergeant

and Franziska are too conspicuous," yet he himself immediately excuses this by the remark that Lessing took delight in both these characters, and therefore developed them somewhat more fully than was exactly necessary. But even these lingering scenes enhance the nationality of the play, and that popularity, which, a century ago, was wholly unexampled, is not yet extinguished, and never can expire so long as German character preserves its original traits. Thus, to-day, after a century of vast changes in the life of the German people, Lessing's characters still exert an influence through their poetic truth, and interest us as witnesses and co-workers of a unique and important period. But whilst all the figures in this drama belong to comedy, from the ridiculous Riccaut, with his now cringing, now presumptuous beggarliness, to the affecting humor of the generous Sergeant and the faithful German servant, in Tellheim alone, who is the representative figure, is displayed the tragical earnestness of Lessing's muse and character. For Tellheim, not Minna, is the principal personage of this piece, the motive of which — the honor of the soldier and of the military class — is widely different from the half-crazy conceptions of honor exemplified in the Spanish Cavaliers of Lope's and Calderon's dramas. The conflict, also, between honor and love, into which Tellheim is brought by his lawsuit with the state and by his poverty, the result of the noblest conduct, is infinitely more justifiable than the half-barbaric and half-superstitious punctiliousness which is the foundation of Spanish tragedy. It is the ideal sense of honor of the officer and the nobleman as it was developed in the army of the immortal Prussian king, that constitutes the principle of Tell-

heim's course. All things, even love, must yield to honor. Tellheim is the model of an officer; a genuinely chivalrous character in the finest meaning of this much-abused word; an excellent gentleman and master, adored by his servant and by his subalterns on account of his mild humanity, which led him to treat decorously even that most contemptible Philistine of a host, the type of creeping snobbishness, instead of chastising him as he deserved; a true friend, capable of the deepest love, because full of reverence for woman, full of esteem, which made it intolerable to unite a betrothed to his fate and name, when both have suffered injury, though undeserved — injury which he deems irreparable, since it touches his honor. Thus he stands before us; thus his noble nature develops to the height where the emotion of true love and its highest duty wins the victory also over the prejudices of caste. To the rich and happy maiden, surrounded by proud and aristocratic relatives, he dare not, although she herself urges him, keep the troth which, according to his conceptions, would destroy her happiness, and even degrade her. But he throws himself at the feet of the woman, disinherited and abandoned by her friends for his sake, and implores her to permit him to devote his life to her service. He is proud only where he alone is the *receiver*; he is all humility and devotion where he is allowed to be the *giver*. And on this height, where nature triumphs over conventionality, genuine humanity over the prejudices of precedent, love over the demands of caste, was vouchsafed to him the best deserved and most highly prized reward, namely, the full recognition of his spotless honor, through the justice of his august commander and king.



It is honor that twines the garland of love in this incomparable work — the most beautiful that a heart full of love and honor has ever invented. For in this Minna von Barnhelm is revealed, not merely, as Goethe has once said, Lessing's understanding, but also his great, warm, noble heart — the complete Lessing. It was one of the strange caprices of Tieck to wish to discover for this character a connection with some English prototype. Lessing's Tellheim is essentially Lessing himself; and we shall see, in the further course of his experience, that, in a similar position, the severe trial of which he may not have anticipated when he wrote his Minna, he prepared for himself a heavy weight of sorrow, and lost beautiful years through a similar excessive delicacy in pecuniary matters. "What justice! what clemency!" exclaims Tellheim, as he reads the royal letter which reestablishes his honor and his happiness. But clemency is secondary with him: the first consideration is justice. It is justice which this Tellheim-Lessing employs for the glorification of that great sovereign whose genius had determined the major in the play to become a soldier in order to serve him. It was the same desire that caused the author of Minna to put forth exertions for years in order to attain the same distinction. When he wrote this piece, he was still waiting for the fulfilment of such a wish. So much the greater appears the candor of the poet in his work. That he had dared to bring into the theatre, and even on the stage, of his own capital the king, if not in person, at least in his actions and the measures of his government, was an unheard-of boldness; and even out of Berlin, in Hamburg, and indeed in Paris, it was necessary that the Prussian sanction

should remove the scruples which were for a long time opposed to the representation of Lessing's poem.

But still more unprecedented in German literature was such a character as Tellheim. This Prussian major of 1763, this nobleman and officer, full of the severest military sense of honor, but a sense of honor which does little for the great from affection, not much more from duty, but all for the sake of his own honor, and to whom, therefore, "the great are superfluous," — this officer, who needs and asks no favor, but only justice, and when justice is awarded him, rejects every demonstration of favor, is indeed a very remarkable phenomenon. He declines even the offer to continue in the service. He wishes to remain free; for "the service of the great is a dangerous one, and does not compensate for the restraint and humiliation which it costs." This soldier is so far removed from presuming upon his mere soldiership, that "at most," as he expresses himself, he "cannot *regret* having become a soldier." "I became a soldier from partiality to I know not what political principles, and from the whim that it is good for every capable man to test this calling for a time, in order to familiarize himself with all that is called danger, and to learn coolness and resolution. Only the extremest need could have compelled me to make a destination of this trial, a trade of this occasional occupation." And to be a soldier merely in order to fight to-day here, to-morrow there, he calls "to travel as a butcher's boy — nothing more." These principles of Lessing's major are quite as revolutionary as those of Schiller's major in "Cabal and Love," who, twenty years afterwards, to the words, "The prince gave you this sword," returns this

well-known answer: "The state gave it to me by the hand of the prince." These principles have a bearing on centuries of the future.

And how lovingly are all the secondary characters treated! The faithful, honest, coarse-witted servant Just, the amiable, magnanimous sergeant, with what finest knowledge of the heart are they sketched and filled up! Lessing loved the people, and knew them through and through: for this reason his portraits are all life-like. The Romanticists, whom Lessing could never tolerate, did not know the people, nor love them; therefore no one of them has succeeded in creating a dramatic figure or scene out of this sphere, — not even the excellent Immermann, who prospered with his *Hofschulze* and *Patriot Kasper* only when he bade adieu to romanticism. And how natural is everything in Lessing's description! the chambermaid, who, with her sergeant, form a sort of comical counterpart to Tellheim and Minna; and the immortal Riccaut, type of all swindling *chevaliers d'industrie* and sharpers of the stage. And even the host, the scandal of the worthy Just, in whose eyes he still remains a dirty scoundrel, in spite of all the Dantzie schnapps expended by him, — how has Lessing portrayed in him the real German Philistine of yore, with his cringing and fawning before the rich and aristocratic; his pusillanimous meanness towards merit in misfortune; his enthusiasm for the literal omniscience of the king, and of the high magistracy and police, into whose shoes everything is shoved, and who are made responsible for all that happens. None of the later dramatists have attained a similar plastic skill, if we except, perhaps, Freytag, in his comedy "The Journalists," with

the excellent figure of his Piepenbrink. Our young dramatists of to-day ought to read Lessing's *Minna* a few times every year : it would do them no harm.

The more one reflects upon this piece, and upon the effect which it produced, the more must one admire the sure grasp with which Lessing took out of the actual life of the nation around him the only material which could secure to his poem the sympathy of the popular mind. Goethe, who, in his old age, laments for himself and the German poets that the life of the nation brought nothing as a stimulus for their genius, complained, indeed, as regards Lessing, that "this extraordinary man was condemned to live in a time too poor to furnish him with better materials than those elaborated in his pieces ;" and that "he was obliged to meddle with Saxon and Prussian transactions in his *Minna von Barnhelm*, because he could find nothing better."\* But Goethe has also pointed out in what a masterly manner Lessing knew how to use this material. "The intense hatred," he says in his autobiography, "which prevailed between Prussia and Saxony during the war, could not be obliterated by the declaration of peace. The Saxon now felt for the first time the full pain of the wounds inflicted upon him by the insolent Prussian. Political tranquillity could not immediately restore individual friendliness. *This, however, was effected symbolically by Lessing's Minna von Barnhelm.* The grace and loveliness of the Saxon ladies overcome the dignity and stubbornness of the Prussians ; and in the principal personages, as well as in the subordinates, a happy union of whimsical and obstinate elements is artistically represented." In

\* Eckermann, I. 340.

fact, both nations could be, and were, satisfied with this poem; and the applause won by the play in Berlin was no injury to the good reception it met with in Leipsic. Lessing, however, said that he himself was obliged to be neither Saxon nor Prussian in order to write it. Besides, he was compelled to make the most of the applause bestowed upon his work, both within and without the theatre; for the pecuniary compensation which Minna von Barnhelm brought to the author was — nothing! \*

\* Ramler's Letter to Knebel, quoted in Riemer's *Mittheilungen über Goethe*, I. 385.

GOTTHOLD EPHRAIM LESSING.

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BOOK SIXTH.

FOURTH RESIDENCE AT BERLIN — LAOKOÖN.

1767 — 1770.



## CHAPTER I.

### RETURN TO BERLIN. CONCLUSION OF THE LETTERS ON LITERATURE.

**L**ESSING had lived nearly five years in Breslau when he resolved to give up his position there. With the conclusion of peace (1763) the intense charm of war-life and its shifting events had ceased for him. To be a soldier in a time of peace, wandering about with his chief from one review to another was insufferably tedious, and he found that it was high time for him "to come back into the old track." For his family at Kamenz, who had become more and more accustomed to apply to him in all pecuniary distresses, the intelligence that he was about to give up so lucrative a position was like a clap of thunder; and Lessing, in spite of his filial love, was obliged to suggest repeatedly, by letter to his kin, that he had another mission to fulfil in life besides earning by drudgery as much money as possible in order that his brothers might become pastors and con-rectors. "I trust," he wrote to his father,\* "that you will not think me capable of wishing to hang my studying on the nail, and devote myself entirely to miserable devices for gaining bread. I have already lost more than three years with these frivolities. It is time for me to come into the old track again. All that

\* Letter dated November 30, 1763. XII. 159.



I aimed at in my present manner of life I have attained : I have nearly reëstablished my health ; I have rested ; and from the little that I have been able to spare have purchased an excellent library, which I do not wish to have purchased in vain." But even such expressions as these availed nothing ; and the son, constantly assailed with remonstrances and admonitions, was obliged frequently to fall back upon the right to be permitted, at thirty-five years of age, to determine his own course of life. "I have already," he writes in another letter, \* "lived out more than half my days ; and I know nothing that could compel me to make myself a slave for the short remnant of them." He is firmly resolved, henceforth, not to accept any situation that is not "wholly to his taste." In fact, just at that time he declined a call to Königsberg, as "professor of eloquence" (as it is still designated in the old peruke style), with the remark to his friends that it was impossible for him to deliver a panegyric on the reigning monarch every year, which was one of the duties of the position. "How I shall get along in the future," he continues, "is my least care. Whoever has health and a will to work has nothing in the world to fear." The father had inquired what would become of him in case of prolonged sickness and other misfortunes which might incapacitate him for asserting his freedom of labor. Lessing replied (not without a pardonable irony) that to fear such evils evinces but a feeble trust in Providence. "My faith is greater," he adds, "and I have friends."

At the beginning of the year 1765, Lessing resigned his place. He was now again "the old bird on the

\* Dated June 13, 1764. XII. 161.

roof," and had the choice, and also the torment of choosing, whither he should direct his flight. For a long time he vacillated between south and north. The studies for Laokoön, the greater part of which he had already elaborated at Breslau, drew him towards the south. For years it had been his favorite plan to go by way of Vienna (where he intended to use the Imperial Library), to Italy and Greece, in order to allow his knowledge of the old classic world to mature in the contemplation of nature, life, and monuments of art. For a long time he had wished to see the Apollo Belvedere and the group of Laokoön with his own eyes, and was for a while undetermined whether he should not immediately enter on his journey from Breslau. He stood on the cross-roads of life; and one can hardly resist the thought that it would have been better for his individual fate if he had carried out that plan.

At any rate, the subsequent extremely melancholy realization of his desire to see Italy, and perhaps his whole later sorrowful destiny, would have been spared him! But, on the other hand, it is certain that we should then have been obliged to do without his Dramaturgy, and, as it is more than probable, his Nathan also.

He did not go to Italy, but journeyed *via* Kamenz and Leipsic (where he visited his parents), to Berlin, whither he was drawn not only by the longing to see old friends, but also by a very definite predilection for this brisk, blooming city of Prussia, now raised to the rank of a great power. To these was added a new element of attraction. Just at the time when Lessing was preparing to leave Breslau, an opportunity seemed to

open before his friends at Berlin to secure the permanent services of this distinguished man in a situation which was one of the few that, as he said in the letter to his father, were "according to his taste." Farther on we shall return to this affair and its lamentable course. It is certain that from the first Lessing regarded this removal to Berlin as only temporary, and that he had by no means abandoned the plan of that great journey, but still adhered to it, in case the efforts of his friends should fail. His correspondence during the last period of his two years' residence at Berlin is very meagre.\* More satisfactory, however, is the information given by his youngest brother, Charles, whom he took under his charge immediately after his arrival at Berlin, and who, therefore, reports as an eye-witness concerning his brother's life and labors. The picture sketched by him is, indeed, anything but delightful.

Soon after his arrival in the city, Lessing found himself, by reason of the ceaseless bleedings to which his purse had been subjected by his family, "just as rich as he was five years before, when he left it." He was again fettered to the desk, and forced to intellectual efforts which, to such an extent, had become foreign to him. The labor which had been a recreation to him at Breslau, became here often an oppressive burden, because it took the form of necessary exertion for daily bread; whilst his body, grown stronger, and accustomed to vigorous exercise, with difficulty endured the sedentary habits now imposed upon him. At Breslau, relieved from anxiety for subsistence, he had habituated himself

\* Only three letters from Gleim to Lessing; *from* Lessing, only seven in all — three to his father and brother, one to Klotz, and three to Gleim.

to that freedom in study and scientific pursuits which his brother Charles describes to us so charmingly ; and now this habit of liberty was only a source of misery to him at Berlin, where the printer's devil besieged his door from morning till evening for copy. In such moments, it seemed to him, indeed, as he said by way of warning to his brother, that "authorship is the most odious and dull of occupations ;" and he formed plan after plan to change his condition.

Nevertheless, much was accomplished during this residence at Berlin. Immediately after his arrival, he wrote \* the conclusion of the Letters on Literature, which he had inaugurated six years before. It was a criticism of Meinhard's characteristics of the best Italian poets and their works.

This eminent man was not destined long to survive the praise of Lessing which made his name immortal. He died, while on a journey two years afterwards, at Berlin, where Lessing became personally acquainted with him, and found in him a kindred spirit and fellow-aspirant after the same aims of philosophico-æsthetical investigation. Lessing felt as a severe blow the premature decease of the man who had received a fine culture in Italy, and especially at Rome, in the most intimate association with Winckelmann and Mengs. But that small treatise is important and interesting, not merely because with it Lessing bade adieu forever to all activity in behalf of a common journalistic enterprise, and withdrew henceforth wholly to himself, — it is so also, and in a still higher degree, from the attitude which Lessing, once for all, assigned to the rising German literature, in

\* In June and July of 1765.

opposition to the so-called encouragements through protection and promotion on the part of the great and powerful. This attitude is a decidedly democratic, or, if you please, republican one. Meinhard, as the result of his studies in the history of culture, had directed attention to the extremely small number of good Italian poets whom the age of the Medici, so celebrated as protectors and promoters of the arts, had produced, and from this fact deduced an observation which Lessing found to be "as acute as true," and at the same time very applicable to the external condition of the German literature of his time, whose representatives "complained frequently and bitterly about want of support, and in the tone of real flatterers so exaggerated the influence of the great upon the arts that one could easily detect their selfish purpose." The view which Lessing adopted as his own may be condensed into the simple proposition, "That Mæcenases do not call forth geniuses, but always rather injure those who are already such, if the patron himself does not possess a truly elevated taste for the arts." "It is a mistake," Meinhard had said, "to attribute the want of great geniuses at certain times to the want of rewards and encouragements. True genius, like an impetuous stream, works its own way through the greatest obstacles. Shakespeare, who was educated to a mechanical trade, became a great poet, without having any encouragement whatever, and, indeed, without knowing it."

All this the author had corroborated by further examples, and, even as regards the then so much lauded patronage of Louis XIV., pointed to the fact that all the great geniuses who lent the highest splendor to his

reign had made their own way without his encouragement. Even Racine, through the influence of court-favor, was rather diverted from the original naturalness and truth of his poetry, than advanced in the right direction. The greatest disadvantage to literature, however, which the artificial protection accorded to poetry and art by rulers draws after it, is that thereby the *cacoethes scribendi* is propagated to an unnatural extent, and many inferior minds venture upon works which should be attempted only by intellects of the highest order. Those who cannot attain the great traits of nature—for these are reached by genius alone—seek to distinguish themselves by new mannerisms and affectations, or lead the public from nature to the artificial; and this is doubtless the reason why the eras of the great “patrons of the arts” have always been followed by epochs of bad taste and false wit. Lessing subscribed entirely to these views. And he did so at a time when the later lament of the poet that the German muse, already represented by Klopstock, Wieland, and Lessing, —

“ From the greatest German son,  
From the great Frederic’s throne,  
Defenceless and unhonored went,” —

was in everybody’s mouth, and when Germany was to experience that its greatest sovereign would not grant even to a Lessing the place where this emancipator of the German mind could have found a firm footing for the work of his life.

## CHAPTER II.

## LESSING AND FREDERIC THE GREAT.

IN going to Berlin, Lessing did not follow a blind chance. As already intimated, his arrival happened in accordance with the importunity of his friends, to whom it seemed that just at this time a favorable opportunity presented itself to secure him permanently for Berlin and Prussia, by the offer of a position suited to his tastes. They knew, at the same time, from long experience, how utterly incapable he was to do anything for himself, and therefore redoubled their efforts. Eight years earlier, as before related, Lessing's friend Kleist, in connection with Gleim and Ramler, had put everything in motion to this purpose; and from an expression in a letter to Ramler, we see that Lessing himself cherished a hope that King Frederic would find a way to turn his services to account. But this hope had not been realized, and the present prospect was also destined to fail. Through Lessing's entire life there prevails an adverse influence which can be comprehended in the brief expression, *He had no luck*. Whoever reads with attention his letters — the chief source for a knowledge of his life and character — will meet more than once his complaint of this fate, although under the disguise of that wonderfully affecting humor with which his strong heart strove to control its disappointment. We

are yet far from that epoch in his life when the demon of disaster was to strike him fatally in the only part where the energy of this giant was vulnerable. But was it not already a misfortune in the career of this splendid man, that the great king who had uttered the immortal words, "A man who seeks truth, and loves it, must be esteemed in every human society," did not become acquainted with the most heroic lover of truth of his age, and so dismissed him unrecognized? that Lessing, himself a king in the realm of free thought and of literature, towering far above all his contemporaries, remained his whole life long far from, and foreign to, the greatest German monarch of his own, and indeed of many centuries, although he spent the best part of his life in the Prussian capital, and although for many years that city remained the point whereon he reasonably hoped to find firm footing, — only, at last, to see this hope forever shattered at one blow? Yet we will not anticipate our narrative.

The point of time in which Lessing struck his tent at Breslau corresponded with an event which seemed to promise a speedy fulfilment of the wishes of his friends in his behalf. The librarian of the Royal Library, a Frenchman, Gautier de la Croze, had died at the beginning of the year 1765. By his death a place had become vacant which was especially suited to Lessing's tastes and needs. With its duties was connected the supervision of the royal cabinet of coins and collection of antiquities, and Lessing's friends had no doubt that they should succeed in directing the choice of the king in refilling the position to the only man in Germany worthy of it. There was only one other in Europe who



could have disputed precedence with Lessing. This was the famous Winckelmann, who then lived at Rome. And the king decided in favor of Winckelmann, to whom his attention had been attracted just at that time by a peculiar circumstance. Frederic, at the beginning of the year 1765, had purchased for Berlin the rare collection of gems and casts of Baron von Stosch, which Winckelmann had arranged and provided with an excellent catalogue.\* Indeed, he was at this very time occupied with plans for the promotion of art in his capital. He wished to found a school of painters, and had already commenced negotiations in order to draw to Berlin the most distinguished Italian painter of the day, Pompeo Battoni; and when he declined the offer, Winckelmann's friend Rafael Mengs. Winckelmann's appointment was favored also by the circumstance, that Lieutenant-Colonel Guichard, known, under the name of Quintus Icilius, as one of King Frederic's most intimate companions, and commissioned by him to propose a new librarian, had been, while a theological student in the University of Halle, an intimate friend of the great art-critic and archæologist. Nevertheless Guichard had first proposed Lessing; but when the king rejected the proposal, he nominated Winckelmann, and found immediate acquiescence. To yield to Winckelmann could be no mortification to Lessing; and even his friends were obliged to admit the propriety of such a choice, since Winckelmann's reputation and merits in the department especially concerned were then incontestably superior. Thus even Lessing's nearest friend, Nicolai, did not hesitate, as agent of Guichard, to open negotiations with Winckelmann, who,

\* Winckelmann's Works, II. 575-637, Stuttgart edition, 1847.

on his part, accepted at once the honorable and lucrative appointment, which reached him, at Rome, on the 29th of August.

Nevertheless the affair was broken off, we are sorry to say, through the capricious avarice of the great monarch. To be sure, he had agreed to raise the salary, which was originally, like all the salaries of his officials, very small, — it was only five hundred thalers, — to fifteen hundred, or, if necessary, to two thousand thalers. But when Winckelmann claimed that sum, the king offered him only half of it! The insulted Winckelmann drew back, and wrote to his friends that he would answer the Prussian king as did that singer, who, in a similar case, replied to him, "*Eh bene ; faccia cantare il suo generale.*"\* Winckelmann's decision followed in October of the same year; and now Lessing and his friends formed new hopes. It was not without cause that Lessing now hastened to conclude his *Laokoön*, which he published in May of the following year. His aim was to demonstrate his right to that position, by a work which was adapted to prove that only a Lessing could be a worthy substitute for a Winckelmann. Indeed, everything seemed to be in his favor. Since his nineteenth year, he had spent the greater part of his life, till his mature manhood, in Berlin. His most important works, as an author and a poet, had originated in this period; and he had formed his most intimate associations in Berlin. So far as his free, cosmopolitan mind was capable of national preference, his predilection for Prussia had grown stronger, in spite of the events of the

\* "Very well; let his general sing for him." Frederic had said that the salary which the singer claimed was the same as that of a general.

Seven Years' War, so fatal to his native Saxony. He had even, in a certain sense, as assistant of Tauentzien, taken an active part in the last years of that war, which was to decide concerning the future of Prussia as a European great power, and the principal representative of Germany in Germany itself; and this participation had matured that first classical work of German dramatic poetry, *Minna von Barnhelm*, whose exclusively national character had given an entirely new tone and direction to his country's literature. Thus, though feeling himself above all things a German, he could regard himself as belonging to Prussia and its great king: at any rate, he had a claim to consideration on the part of the state and the sovereign, who, after the appearance of *Minna von Barnhelm*, could, with greater reason than before, boast of him as their own. So much the sadder is it to see that Lessing was to publish that last work only to be deceived in all his hopes, and with it to bid an eternal farewell at once to Prussia and to Berlin.

King Frederic, in his well-known utter disregard of German literature, had taken no notice of Lessing's writings. But it was still worse, that the name of Lessing had nevertheless come to his ears in a manner that, once for all, prejudiced him against it.

We must now refer again to the correspondence between Voltaire and Lessing, and to the incident which caused it. To be sure, almost fifteen years had elapsed since that affair; but the king, who had a tenacious memory, had preserved in it the name of Lessing as a man of doubtful character, as Voltaire had doubtless described him at every opportunity. When, therefore, after Winckelmann's refusal, the before-mentioned friend

and favorite of the king again proposed Lessing, a passionate scene ensued. The king again declared that he would not have Lessing. Perhaps, however, it would have been possible to have overcome his aversion by calm representations; but Guichard's well-meant zeal spoiled all. He spoke warmly, even passionately, in behalf of Lessing, whom he called one of the most learned men of Europe; and remarked, with an allusion to the king's predilection for Frenchmen, that, if the king would not take a German, he would not obtain any librarian at all, since profound scholars, like Lessing, were no longer to be found either among the French or in other nations. The king, as Nicolai, to whom we owe this detailed information, goes on to relate,\* defended the French; depreciated the Germans as pedants; appealed, as regards erudition, to the celebrated Benedictines of St. Maur in Paris; and the end of the controversy was, that he dismissed his favorite with the words, that "he would himself write to Paris, and find a learned librarian, without any help from him and his Germans." And he did get a librarian; but the avenging Nemesis prepared a very peculiar punishment for the self-willed monarch who had dared to despise a Lessing. Frederic had recently noticed a cleverly written book by a French canon, living at Lyons, Jacques Pernety (*Lettres Philosophiques sur les Physionomies*), and resolved to call him. With this purpose he asked one of his French finance functionaries, by the name of Pernety, whom Helvetius had recommended to him, whether the author Pernety was related to him. He replied that he was his brother. And since this brother was besides a

\* Allgem. deutsche Bibliothek, Part 99, Sec. 2, p. 354.

monk of the Benedictine order of the learned congregation of St. Maur, the king was all the more inclined to grant him the position of librarian, especially as the cunning Frenchman found ways and means in Berlin to procure for his brother a recommendation from D'Alembert, who praised the insignificant monk to the king as a great scholar. Not until the appointment had been made was it discovered that the person called was not the noted author of the book in question, but a younger cousin of that writer, by the name of Anton Joseph Pernety, author of some obscure writings, and anything but the man that a king like Frederic II. would have drawn near to his throne. Even as librarian, he was wholly useless, besides being given to all manner of superstitions, ghost-seeing as well as alchemy; as also, fifteen years afterwards, he resigned his office, and left Berlin, because he firmly believed in the prophecies of a half-crazed ecclesiastic by the name of Ziehen, who predicted that the end of the world was approaching, and that its destruction would commence in the Protestant province of Brandenburg.\* He returned, therefore, to France in 1783, where he indeed lived to see the destruction of a world, although a different one from that prophesied; for the good pater died, as an octogenarian, in 1801, at Avignon. That was the man whom Frederic the Great called to Berlin, with a salary (very considerable for that time) of a thousand thalers, and to whom a Lessing was obliged to give place. Indeed, Frederic repeated the error committed in this instance, when, in the year 1770, he refused to call Heyne from

\* Wilken, Geschichte der Berliner Bibliothek, 104.

Göttingen, asseverating, "that he would not have a pedant."

Not merely Lessing's friends — Nicolai, Ramler, Mendelssohn, and even the good Gleim, who, by this turn of affairs, almost lost confidence in his idolized king\* — were sore perplexed at the result: Lessing, too, felt it deeply and painfully; for it was a long-cherished desire that was thus annihilated at one blow. From Hamburg, he wrote to his aged father, who was anxious about the lot of his son, who, now near his fortieth year, was still leading an unsettled literary life, "*I have gone away from Berlin, since the only thing which I have so long desired, and the hope of obtaining which has so often consoled me, has failed me.*" How bitter to his proud heart must have been this confession! His condition at that time he describes at the close of his Dramaturgy, where he tells how he came to Hamburg: "I stood idle in the market-place. No one wished to hire me, doubtless because no one knew what to do with me, except these (Hamburg) friends." He wrote to Gleim, "I hope it will not be hard for me to forget Berlin." But in his soul the disappointment appeared wholly different from what his proud tone of ironical humor betrayed to the world. After his death, there was found among his papers a sheet headed, "To Mæcenas" — a sketch of an elegy, which one cannot read without emotion. "Who is there," he says, "in our days, here in our land, where

\* "I would have moved heaven and earth to keep you with us, if I, like many others, — Sulzer, for instance, — had been in Berlin. For not to him, who, on account of his French education, has become indifferent towards everything that is German, but to those who proclaim themselves German patriots, and have not used every effort to retain a Lessing in the land, to those I charge it that we lose him." — Gleim to Lessing, March 28, 1767.

the inhabitants are still the old barbarians, who cherishes in himself a spark of thy philanthropy, of thy virtuous ambition to protect the favorites of the Muses? How often, with eyes made keen by necessity, have I looked around me to find even a feeble reflection of thee! But at last I have become weary of seeking, and will pour out scornful laughter over these apish imitations." This elegy remained only a sketch; but the bitter feeling which prompted its expression left its sting in the soul of the great man, whom to have misjudged, or, rather, not to have known, is an eternal reproach to his illustrious crowned contemporary. Frederic's eagle eye failed to perceive the only man amongst the thinkers and authors of Germany who was worthy of his regard; and on that account, there was rooted in Lessing's heart that aversion to Berlin and the *régime* of Frederic, which, from the time of his last failure, is frequently to be traced in his letters. If, before that event, he had been displeased with the clique of French *littérateurs* luxuriating at court, and the frivolous derision of religion, which pretended to be philosophy, it was, humanly speaking, quite natural that this feeling should be intensified by the mortifying disgrace and personal depreciation, which must have been doubly painful now that he possessed an honest consciousness of his worth and claims. From that time, he made no further attempt to establish himself at Berlin, and never saw the city again, except a few times as a transient visitor.

To-day, nearly a century later, Rauch's colossal monument of the great Frederic shows, amongst the illustrious contemporaries who surround his pedestal, the form of Lessing. It had better been omitted; for it is to every

Prussian and German only a reminder of one of the greatest wrongs committed by the celebrated Prussian king against the genius of the German nation. We ought not, however, to dismiss this subject without adding a word of apology for the great ruler, who, in recent times, has been unjustly judged, and by none more unworthily than by the celebrated English historian of our days. It is true that Frederic the Great despised the German language and literature; but it is equally true that he had no proper acquaintance with the language which, according to birth, was his mother-tongue. His youth had fallen on a time when scholars in Germany spoke Latin, and the cultivated classes spoke French, whilst German was left to the populace. In 1750, Voltaire was able to write in triumph, from Potsdam, to his friends at Paris, "*Je me trouve ici en France. On ne parle que notre langue. L'allemand est pour les soldats et pour les chevaux; il n'est nécessaire que pour la route.*" This language of the common people was the only German that Frederic knew and spoke; and he himself, in his latter years, more than once regretted his ignorance. It is not true that the king did nothing for the German language, that he despised it all his life long, that he did not believe in the future of the language and literature of his people. He founded the German society, at Königsberg, for the purpose of developing the German language; he received this language into his Academy of Sciences, and wished to have it thoroughly taught in the schools. Towards the end of his life, he employed Garve to translate Cicero's work on moral duties (*De Officiis*), and rewarded the translator, who performed his task well,



with a pension. He knew how to appreciate the few worthy German books that reached him ; he prized Gellert and Gessner ; he praised the poems of Moritz ; but he knew nothing further : and Gottsched, with whom he became personally acquainted, and who appeared to him as the representative and Corypheus of German literature, was not the man to dissuade him from his belief that German authors and scholars were pedants. But whilst we regret and blame his predilection for French literature, founded on and favored by education and circumstances, we must remember that he did not at all over-estimate the Frenchmen of his time in general ; that he rather despised them at the bottom of his heart ; and that, finally, with the spirit of a seer, he prophesied a great future for his own nation and its literature. We ought not to forget that the same king who dismissed Lessing unrecognized, and disregarded Klopstock, Wieland, Herder, and the dawning of a new epoch of German culture, with Goethe at the head, wrote the memorable words, "The German nation is not wanting in genius and intellect ; but it was kept back by circumstances from soaring upward at the same time with its neighbors. *We shall yet have our classic authors.* Every one will read them in order to cultivate himself thereby. Our neighbors will learn German. It will be spoken with pleasure at courts ; and it may be that our language, when perfectly developed, will extend from one end of Europe to the other."

And one fact in honor of the great monarch ought not to be overlooked by Lessing's biographer. It is that Frederic, notwithstanding all that may be said against him, stands in the foremost rank as a coadjutor

and coöperator of his great contemporary in two important respects ; namely, in the awakening and enlivening of German national feeling, and in the contest for the sovereign right of the human mind to the free investigation of truth. With regard to his patriotism, Goethe has discussed it so thoroughly in his autobiography that we need only refer our readers to that work. Concerning the liberality of his ideas, it is sufficient to point to the two sublime principles which the great, philosophical king of the eighteenth century not only expressed in words, but also embodied in the administration of his government, and with which he appears as compeer, and in some sort as forerunner, of his most illustrious contemporary : "*A man who seeks and loves the truth must be esteemed in every human society.*" With this glorious utterance Frederic had accompanied his first official act — the recall of the persecuted philosopher, Wolff — and at the same time proclaimed, with the genuine Lessing spirit, the principle of the free activity of the human soul striving after the knowledge of truth, in opposition to the world of tradition, at a period when the boy Lessing was still sitting on the school-bench at Kamenz. The second famous proposition of Frederic was only a consequence of the first. It was this : "*All religions must be tolerated, and each person saved in his own way (nach seiner Façon selig werden).*" As that first maxim of the great king (which our age is still far from having employed to the best purpose) may serve as a motto for Lessing's "*Rettungen*," and for his defence of the author of the Wolfenbüttel Fragments, so this latter utterance contains the fundamental thought of "*Nathan*," the most splendid work that Lessing has bequeathed to his

nation and to humanity. The time will come when the greatest praise of Frederic will be what he effected as Lessing's unconscious helper.\* Let us now leave the above-mentioned unpleasant episode of Lessing's life, in order to cast a glance on that work which seems, at least externally, connected with that episode, and whose torso form corresponds to its conclusion; namely, Lessing's *Laokoön*.

\* Compare Stahr's address at the celebration of Lessing's birthday (1861), in Leipsic, printed in the *Gartenlaube*, No. 8, p. 121.

## CHAPTER III.

## LAOKOÖN.

"SINCE we possess Lessing's Laokoön, the proposition *that the poet ought not to paint*, belongs to the A B C of poesy." When Lessing appeared, the opposite of this proposition, thus expressed by Frederic Vischer in his *Æsthetics*, was, throughout all Europe, the generally accepted view in both theory and practice. There prevailed a complete blending of the realms of the formative arts and of poetry. Especially in England, distinguished writers and critics had aimed at this intermixture. From England this descriptive poetry (*poetische Malerei*) had been introduced, especially by Thomson's *Seasons*, into Germany, where it had found zealous imitators in Brokes, Haller, Klopstock, and Lessing's friend Kleist, the poet of *Spring*. Even Lessing himself, in his youth, had done homage to Thomson as the greatest picturesque poet of any age.\*

By the Swiss writers on æsthetics, descriptive poetry was raised to a system; and even Winckelmann, as an adherent of the Swiss, had, in his first treatise "On the Imitation of Grecian Works in Painting and Sculpture," declared allegory to be the highest aim of painting, and at the same time laid down the

\* In the "Preface to James Thomson's Tragedies, 1756."

proposition that "*painting has as broad a field as poetry*; and that the painter, as well as the musician, can express the poet's meaning." Finally, in France, the antiquarian and art-critic Count Caylus had gone a step farther. He had set up the picturesqueness of the poets as the highest standard of their æsthetic worth; or, as Lessing expresses it, he had made availability for the painter the touchstone of the poets, and determined their rank by the number of pictures which they offer to the artist.

Lessing, whose peculiar idiosyncrasy aimed at defining sharply the boundaries of adjoining intellectual provinces, and who already, in his essay on "Pope a Metaphysician," had endeavored to draw the limits between poetry and philosophy, and in his researches concerning the fable, to fix the lines of demarcation of the different species of poetry, must have felt all the more strongly incited to the task of separating poetry from the formative arts, since the evil consequences of their intermixture appeared in a remarkable degree in the province of German poesy, which at that time awakened his profound interest.

The confusion of ideas, or, rather, the utter want of ideas, in æsthetic criticism at this time, is sufficiently known to us by Goethe's confessions of his youth. All aspiring spirits longed for a guiding star in the chaotic obscurity of vague sentiment and vacillating taste, and no one realized the want more than Lessing himself, who, in the presence of works of art, felt himself stimulated as a thinker, and impelled to the discovery of their fundamental laws. As early as the year 1754, as feuilletonist of Voss's newspaper, he had joyfully

greeted Hogarth's "Analysis of Beauty;" because the idea that all physical beauty lies in the skilful and varied application of the undulating line appeared to him to have, "at least, limited to something certain, even if it had not fixed," the vacillating taste. Even at that time it is "the fixed and sure conceptions" of the beautiful with which he had to do, in opposition to the vague sentiment and fluctuating judgments of a so-called taste, which, instead of a sound theory, "contents itself among the populace, as well as among scholars, with the miserable proverb, *De gustibus non disputandum*."

It is touching to see with what enthusiasm young Lessing here welcomes a work for which, as he expresses himself, "we shall have occasion to be thankful, if hereafter, by the word *beautiful*, which is daily applied to a thousand objects, one is taught to *think* as much as one has hitherto only *felt*;" and how he expresses the firm conviction that "all lovers of the arts and sciences, which are occupied with beauty of form, — the philosopher, the naturalist, the antiquarian, the orator in the pulpit and on the stage, the painter, the sculptor, the dancer, and even the 'realm of fashion,' — would derive advantage from the newly-discovered definition of the beautiful." Here, too, together with the purely theoretical interest of the thinker and philosopher, we perceive in Lessing that tendency to the practical reality of life, which, in all his efforts, is never out of sight. From this time Lessing directed his attention towards a closer definition of the ideas of the beautiful and of art, as well as towards the separation of the different provinces of the individ-

ual arts, although at first only with reference to poesy. His correspondence with Nicolai and Mendelssohn during the years 1756 and 1757, resulting in the treatise on tragedy, with which the Library of Polite Literature, founded by Nicolai, was opened, shows the first germinations of the new thoughts, of which, ten years afterwards, Laokoön was to come forth as the mature fruit; and a subsequent remark, concerning Kleist, that this author prided himself least of all on his "Spring," proves that Lessing, even then, must have discussed with his friend his reformatory thoughts on the great principle of poetic style. We find this principle clearly enough expressed, so far as the antithesis between poetry and painting is concerned, in the treatises on the fable; where the reason is given why the painter cannot portray any fable deserving the name.

At the same time he buried himself in the study of Homer and Sophocles, in the real living sources of eternal beauty, and in the knowledge of its supreme laws; and it is not too much to say, that from the study of these two poets his Laokoön essentially proceeded. For the true centre of gravity of this work does not lie on the side of formative art; for which Lessing, at that time, was lacking in the deeper culture, attainable only by means of the contemplation of works of art. What knowledge he possessed in this department was limited to a few collections of paintings and engravings; and, as regards the art of antique plastic, to the little that was accessible in the present Dresden Museum.\* It is doubtful whether he had ever seen even a complete full-sized plaster cast of the celebrated

\* See Winckelmann, II. 231.

work from which his book derived its name. At least, such a one did not exist in the Academy of Leipsic, of which Oeser was director, but only a cast of Laokoön's head.\* It was the sense of this want, especially, that, as we have seen, drew Lessing so powerfully towards Italy at the end of his residence in Breslau, where, in a leisure free from care, he had elaborated the Laokoön.

The central point of Lessing's work is rather to be sought on the side of poetry. "To the passionate enthusiasm of Winckelmann and his circle for the formative arts, a counterpoise was to be opposed in the Laokoön; in order that poetry, after frequent one-sided comparisons with plastic art and painting, might attain to its full right." This thought is characterized by Guhrauer as the fundamental principle of the whole work. It was intended to be a treatise of the first importance on poetics, with reference also to the formative, and, indeed, to all the other arts—a theory in which, as with his master, Aristotle, the drama appeared on the summit of all art. The plan embraced three divisions. But Lessing's adverse fate, which caused the failure of his Berlin scheme, suspended the execution of this work, and left the first part a torso; for the completion of which the scattered observations and adjuncts found among his posthumous papers give only unsatisfactory hints. But even in this fragmentary form the work was a real act of emancipation for the æsthetic culture and literature of our people.

With that skill which the formative artist shows in seizing the most fruitful moment for his sketch, Lessing,

\* Goethe's Works, XXVI. 84.



who, to use his own expression, always "liked to bore the board where it is thickest," selected from among his contemporaries just that man whom he himself, as well as his whole age, esteemed most highly as a connoisseur of the beautiful, in order to connect with him his discussions on the laws of art. And again, from among all Winckelmann's judgments, he selected that proposition which was most fruitful for the development of his own ideas. Winckelmann had compared the group of Laokoön with Virgil's description, and placed the poet below the sculptor. By selecting this comparison as the point of departure for his investigations, Lessing placed himself in the centre of the æsthetic circle, from whence he could reach out, impartially, to all sides. This centre was the intermingling of the two provinces of speaking and formative art — an intermingling which, "in the works of the poet and the painter, when they treat the same subject, regards their mutual deviations as errors, which it charges upon each, according as the person making the comparison prefers one or the other art." It seemed to him a worthy thing, after so much had been written about the similarity and harmony of poesy and painting, "to reverse the medal for once, and investigate the characteristic differences of both, in order to see whether, from such differences, there may not follow laws which are peculiar to each, and which often compel them to pursue entirely different paths."

From this distinctive comparison, then, there results the great law of poetic style, in answer to the question, "How alone may the poet be permitted to paint?" The reply is, Not by individual features, as though

the auditor, with the external eye, looked upon a real picture, but only by outlines, in such a manner that the sketch is filled up by the imagination. In a word, the aim of poetry, to give forms; united with its highest distinction, to represent the inner world; and, finally, to portray action; leads to the law of style — *that this art must imitate objects entirely by suggestion.*\*

The course of investigation in Laokoön is as follows: Winckelmann had censured Virgil, because in his description † he makes Laokoön shriek; and praised the sculptor of the group, because he had tempered into a sigh the wild, heaven-piercing cry of anguish. Lessing shows that both poet and sculptor have acted in conformity with their respective arts, and therefore rightly; and that the sculptor especially was not governed by a striving after the expression of a higher moral nobility, as Winckelmann supposes, but merely by a regard to that law of his art, which, among the ancients, was supreme — *the law of beauty*. This law made it imperative for the artist to tranquillize the violent, the distorted, and the hideous, where these must be employed, in such a manner that a degree of beauty might be attained; and thus the master of Laokoön, since he "aimed at the highest beauty possible under the given circumstances of bodily pain," was compelled to soften the agony so that the expression might yet be beautiful. From the comparison of Virgil's description with the work of the sculptor, Lessing obtains still another law for plastic art; and this law is connected with the category of time, whose limitation restricts the sculptor to the imaging of a single instant. That

\* Fr. Vischer, *Æsthetik*, III. 1200.

† *Æneid*, II. 199, 224.

instant, therefore, must be selected which contains the fullest meaning. But the most fruitful moment is that which grants the freest scope to the imagination of the beholder; and the more it presents to the sight, the more it offers to the thought. Therefore the representation of passion in formative art ought never to show an extremity beyond which imagination cannot pass.

Here Lessing had the correct idea in his mind, although he did not formulate it to a correct proposition, when he said that the absolutely momentary and evanescent ought not, in general, to be expressed by sculpture, and never was expressed by ancient plastic art. A refutation of the latter statement is furnished by numerous ancient works of art, and even, strictly speaking, by the group of Laokoön itself; but Lessing confounded the momentary in general with a momentariness of a definite kind. For the momentary, in itself, is not forbidden to the sculptor, but only when it is presented in such a form that the sight of it is enduring but for an instant, because in it a hideous element comes to view.\* From these fixed definitions, thus obtained for formative art, Lessing now prepares the transition to the laws of poetry. He shows that the above law of the prolific moment does not concern the poet, who has, instead, the succession of phenomena and events in time for his domain; in which, also the greatest vehemence of expression is allowable, since it is either so foreshadowed by what precedes, or reacted upon by what follows, that it loses its separate expression, and in such connection even produces the most excellent effect. He shows, furthermore, by a con-

\* Vischer, *Ästhetik*, III. 402 and 1188.

tinued comparison of the group of Laokoön with the description of Virgil, that, since his images are of a spiritual nature, and have motion, which is wanting in plastic works, the poet possesses an infinitely wider field of representation than that which is open to the sculptor. Virgil could represent Laokoön robed, *for in the poet's hands drapery is no drapery, since it conceals nothing*; and his delineations have, in general, this quality, that they do not disguise each other. The imaging artist, on the contrary, is not permitted even to invest the head of his Laokoön with the priestly diadem, because it would conceal the forehead, the seat of expression.\* What follows? This: that the most excellent delineation of the poet is by no means useful in each of its features for the sculptor. But, on the other hand, the masterpiece of the sculptor will be, in each and every feature, of equally good effect for the descriptive poet. It is, therefore, far more probable that the sculptor of the group had in his eye the description of the poet, than that Virgil, in his description, had the group in view, since we do not find in the poet the slightest trace of indebtedness to the work of the sculptor.

Thus was judgment pronounced, not only on the above-mentioned demand of the French archæologist, that the imaging artist must model and paint according to Homer, but also on the endeavor, then lately come into vogue from England, to interpret the ancient poets by the ancient statues, without making the least distinction between the different nature of the two arts, and especially without taking into account the infinitely wider range of poetry. At the same time it is demonstrated that the application of allegory by means of

\* Vischer, III. 1173.

symbols is a mere expedient for the sculptor, which the poet does not need. This was an annihilating stroke to all the numerous poets of that time, who, in utter misconception of this relation, "make all the creatures of their imagination go in masks, because they do not in the least understand the chief function of poetry, which is to allow these creatures to act, and to characterize them by their actions." The "allegorizing" of the age received, herewith, its death-blow.

Poetry is that art which most perfectly satisfies the law that every work should explain itself. It can, therefore, venture to employ materials hitherto unknown, because its subjects are explained by words. And the poet, in a far higher degree than the sculptor, is inventive. Indeed, he is able to spread out before the inner eye the whole visible world. When, therefore, Caylus, with a contemptuous allusion to Milton, had ventured the derisive assertion that blindness might, perhaps, be the greatest similarity which this poet had with Homer, Lessing could well return the sublime utterance, "Milton cannot, to be sure, fill galleries of art. But if it were necessary that, so long as I should possess the bodily eye, its sphere should limit the perceptions of my inner eye, I would, in order to be free from this limitation, welcome the loss of physical sight!"

From this point he proceeds to the determination of the great law of poetic style, as regards the description of visible forms. Painting has, in the representation of objects, its natural restriction as to time. "It must wholly abstain from succession in time;" it cannot, therefore, represent progressive actions as such, but is restricted either to coexisting and collateral actions,

or to mere material objects, which, by means of their position, suggest action.

It can, in general, imitate action — that is, a succession of "motions which aim at a purpose" — only suggestively, by means of bodily forms. Poetry, on the contrary, whose province is succession in time, as space is of the sculptor and painter, describes bodily forms, it is true, but only suggestively, by means of actions.

Painting, restricted to a moment of action, must, therefore, select "the most pregnant" moment; that is, the one which renders most comprehensible what precedes and follows. Likewise poetry, in its progressive imitation, can avail itself of but one property of material objects, and must, therefore, select that one which awakens the sensuous impression of the object, under the particular relation which the poet's purpose requires.

From this principle is derived the critical injunction of simplicity in the choice of picturesque epithets, and of abstinence in the poetical delineation of material objects.

This theoretical result of speculation, or dry deduction of principles, is, then, confirmed and illustrated, — positively by the practice of Homer, and negatively by the opposite style of many modern poets.

Thereby Lessing directs attention to the difference between poetry and prose. The prosaist is content if he is intelligible, clear, and distinct. The poet, on the other hand, is not satisfied with these qualities; he "wishes to endow the ideas which he awakens in us with such vivacity, that in their rapidity we think we feel the sensuous impressions of their objects, and in this moment of illusion cease to be conscious of the means which he has applied to this end — his words." He must not,

therefore, endeavor, by means of prolix and consecutive description, to rival the painter in a province where the latter is, from the nature of the case, infinitely his superior, on account of the sharpness, clearness, and objective precision which formative art is able to bestow upon visual images.

For whenever such an attempt is made, "I hear the poet laboring in every line, but am very far from seeing the desired result." A flower painted by Huysum surpasses all poetical description of its beauties, because "to all such word-pictures of bodily forms the illusion at which poetry especially aims is wanting; and it cannot but be wanting, since the coexistence of material objects thereby comes into collision with the consecutive nature of speech." The separation of a whole into its parts is, indeed, facilitated; but the reunion of these parts into a whole is difficult, yea, impossible, to the imagination. When, therefore, poetry, as in Homer, really describes circumstances, it adopts the "artifice" of throwing an order of coexistence into an order of succession. Homer does not describe the finished shield of Achilles, but he shows us the divine artist in the act and process of fabricating it; he lets the figures start forward in relief before our eyes.

Thus a death-blow was given to the then raging "fury of description" in poetry, and the old damnatory sentence pronounced by Horace on all descriptive poetry renewed. It is especially in the representation of physical beauty that the newly-derived law of style for the delineation of the visible finds its most decided application. For this department belongs exclusively to formative art, and poetry is forbidden to meddle with it.

Every attempt of the poet, even though he were an Ariosto, to rival the sculptor in this respect, produces, according to Lessing's striking figure, the impression "as if stones were seen rolling up a mountain, with which a splendid edifice was to be erected on the summit, but which all roll down again of themselves on the other side." "But," objects now Lessing himself, "does not poetry lose too much, if all images of physical beauty are taken from her?" "Who wishes to deprive her of them?" he answers. "Because she is excluded from the narrow path of a sister art, wherein, if admitted, she would toil on anxiously without ever reaching the desired goal, is there not still many another way opened to her, in which formative art must give her precedence?"

And now he proceeds to show that every sacrifice which poetry is obliged to make is more than compensated for by the immeasurable advantages which it possesses over all other arts. Here, then, the eye opens upon the magnificent prospect of poetry, which is no longer merely "the realm of perfection," as is said at the beginning of Laokoön, but comprehends the whole dominion of being and of life. Thus poetry can also describe visual beauty, although in a way peculiar to itself. Indeed, it can exceed the force of formative art in this respect, for it can describe beauty by the effect which it produces, as Homer has done with Helen, and can transform beauty into grace by showing beauty in motion. The enrichment of æsthetics by this conception, which was afterwards so fully developed by Schiller, is a merit which Lessing shares with the English philosopher Hume.\* If the sculptor, on his part,

\* Guhrauer, II. 1, 47. Hettner, Literaturgesch., d. 18 Jahrh. I. 419.



wishes to make the creations of the poet productive to himself, he cannot do it otherwise than as the ancient artists did with Homer. "They fostered in themselves the spirit of the poet; they filled their imaginations with his sublimest traits; the fire of his enthusiasm enkindled theirs; they saw and felt like him; and thus their works were imprints of Homer's, not in the relation of a portrait to its original, but in the relation of son to father—like, but different." A line of Homer, in his description of Jupiter, sufficed Phidias in creating the eternal type and ideal of the sculptured head of the Olympian king.

But poetry draws into the compass of its representation not only the beautiful, but also the ugly, and even the terrible, and that union of the terrible and the disgusting, the hideous; for the ugly is, in fact, evil made visible; and poetry, more than any other art, reveals the inner moral world, which is not conceivable without the counter forces and fermentations of evil. Through the rich means at the disposal of the poet, evil is now placed in a deep spiritual connection, which at once intensifies and relieves its character.\*

To the imaging artist, on the contrary, the expression of ugliness, even mere ugliness of forms, is denied; or only permitted with great restrictions and under fixed conditions; and a Thersites, whom Homer could allow himself to portray, because he needed his ugliness, in order to make him ridiculous, would not be chosen by any painter or sculptor as an object of his art, because his art cannot, like the poet's, use ugliness merely as a means to another effect, and then let it immediately disappear.

\* Vischer, III. 1189.

## CHAPTER IV.

## RESULTS AND EFFECTS.

WITH the Laokoön, a limit was set, for the first time, to the confounding of poetry with the province of the imaging arts. It is justly said by Vischer, that German literature may be proud of having, once for all, established, through Lessing, this great fundamental law ; in accordance with which the poet has to represent the visible with a few touches, only in such a manner that it shall be taken up by the movement of the imagination, and represented suggestively by means of actions. Even this discovery was a great advance. But the wealth of new, penetrating thoughts disclosed by the Laokoön, at a time when there was no presentiment of them in the public mind, extends still farther. The recognition of beauty as the supreme principle for the formative art of the ancients ; the well-defined boundaries of its realm, and the demonstration of the manner in which alone the sculptor can rival the poet ; the placing of poetry above all the other arts ; the extension of its realm over the entire visible and invisible world of life and being ; the proof that action is the soul of poetry ; the prominence given to Homer as contrasted with Virgil ; — all these, and many other things besides, were gains of inestimable worth, and became means of advancement for the æsthetic culture of all subsequent

time. Their influence is felt even to the present day ; when, in opposition to the allegorical aberrations of art which offended Lessing nearly a century ago in the great monuments of the capital of Prussia, and which appear in the sculptured groups of the Royal Bridge, and still worse in the frescoes of the vestibule of the Museum, one has only to produce Lessing's Laokoön in order to seal their condemnation. The new conception of poetry in the Laokoön annihilated at one blow the empty, childish nature of the lyric of that time ; to which, in the beginning of his career, Lessing himself had done homage. Indeed, it seemed to Herder that Lessing's principles would have the effect of entirely banishing the lyric and the epic from Parnassus — fears which were not in the least shared by Lessing, who aimed merely at assigning to the different classes their fixed places in the general scale, and separating the lower from the higher. At the same time, it is true that "action" became the battle-cry of the young "Stürmer und Dränger ;" \* and that the influence of Lessing's theories is to be read on every page of the Frankfort *Gelehrte Anzeigen* (Learned Advertiser), established by Goethe and his associates as the critical organ of that school.

For, if Lessing could not calculate upon either the appreciation or effect of his Laokoön among his scholarly contemporaries, still less could he foresee the importance of its influence on the rising generation, the future upholders of our literature, before whom he, standing on

\* This term is derived from the title of one of Klinger's plays, *Sturm und Drang* (Storm and Stress, or Passion), which was one of the first productions of that movement in German literature excited by the study of Shakespeare, and culminating in Schiller and Goethe. Those who participated in this Titanic war of literary emancipation are called *Stürmer und Dränger*. — TRANS.

the boundaries of two periods, carried the torch of progress. Even in his old age, Goethe felt \* still a breath of that inspired rapture with which the Laokoön had filled the youth of eighteen years, and by means of which he beheld the obscurity wherein æsthetical theory had hitherto groped about illuminated as by a blow from a magic wand.

Wieland, who, just at that time, was composing his *Agathon*, thenceforth carefully avoided all seductions to picturesque descriptions, "because Lessing pulls him by the ear." †

Herder, then twenty-five years of age, profoundly struck by the weight of meaning in Lessing's propositions, won his first critical spurs in his attempt to illustrate them; while, at the same time, he brought the Laokoön into general notice. Herder also pointed out the want of a comparative parallel between poetry and music. He did not know that Lessing had reserved this theme, of which he afterwards developed one point in the *Dramaturgy*, for the second part of the Laokoön; and that he was prepared to treat it with a depth and breadth of thought of which Herder had no idea. And, in fact, three years after the appearance of this work, Lessing was able to write to Nicolai that no one as yet, not even Herder, had dreamed what he was really aiming at in the Laokoön; although Herder was the only one for whose sake it was worth while to "bring his treasures into the clear light of day." Lessing received

\* Goethe's Works, XXV. 161.

† Wieland himself says in his poem *Idris und Zenide* (written in 1768), Canto IV., stanza 13, speaking of one of his characters, Itiphall,—

"He leaves the river behind, and enters the grove  
Which I, since Lessing pulls my ear, will not describe!"

not the slightest recognition from Moeser, a man, in so many respects of kindred spirit, whom he highly esteemed; and who, in his treatise "Virgil and Tintoretto," showed conclusively how both poet and painter had labored in perfect accordance with the principles of their respective arts, as developed in the Laokoön.\* He was much pleased, however, with the criticism of his work by young Garve, the pupil of Gellert, and his successor in the Universal German Library at Leipsic (1769). Garve was the only man who undertook to follow, step by step, the order of Lessing's ideas, and to show the philosophical worth of his production; while he, at the same time, made prominent the want of sharp separation between the provinces of plastic art and painting, and justified the principle of the modern lyric in opposition to Lessing's one-sided opinion, which was formed from the antique stand-point of sculpture. It was Garve's criticism which induced Lessing to set forth more in detail the totality of his purposes; though this was done only in private, in a letter to his friends Nicolai and Mendelssohn. He answered none of his critics publicly, "however many fools might pounce upon the Laokoön." Their names are now forgotten: only that of Sulzer, the old, well-known grudger of his great contemporary's merits, ought to be mentioned here; whose proud, professorial ignoring of Lessing and the Laokoön received its proper chastisement from Goethe in the Frankfort Advertiser.† But it was reserved for the great, philosophical reformer of æsthetics, Immanuel Kant, in his Critique of the Faculty of Judgment, to complete the separation of art from morality, which

\* Kreyssig; Moeser, 147.

† Goethe's Works, XXXIII. 1-10.

Lessing had merely indicated ; and it was Schiller's task to abolish the metaphysical and moral antithesis of freedom and nature which Kant had left unsolved. It is very remarkable that Kant, in his writings, mentions Lessing only a few times, and quite incidentally ; while Lessing, on his part, seems scarcely to have noticed the deepest thinker among his contemporaries, who had already established his claim to the title of Philosopher by his treatise *On the Beautiful and the Sublime*.\*

\* This latter circumstance is partly explicable from the fact that the real period of Kant's splendor of fame began with the publication of his "Critique of Pure Reason," which occurred in the year of Lessing's death, 1781. It was, however, far otherwise with Kant, who, five years older than Lessing, survived him about twenty-three years. Both of these men held intimate friendship with Mendelssohn, Nicolai, Marcus Herz, &c., without thereby being brought into personal acquaintance with each other. And yet they came near being colleagues, when, in the year 1764, the professorship of eloquence in the University of Königsberg, which had first been offered to Kant, was, after his refusal, extended to Lessing, who declined it for the same reason as Kant, — because with its duties was connected the obligation to deliver annually a panegyric upon the reigning monarch. How highly Lessing was esteemed by him, however, is evident from one of Kant's letters to Marcus Herz, wherein he writes, under date of November 24, 1776, "One passage in your book still dwells in my mind, for whose tenor I must reprove your partial friendship. The praise bestowed upon me in a *parallel with Lessing* disturbs me. For really I do not yet possess any merit which would render me worthy of it ; and I feel as though some enemy had awarded me such claims in order to derive therefrom occasion for malicious censure." From Hamann's letters to Herder we discover that Kant had read, not only the juvenile dramas of Lessing, but also his last work, the "Nathan." But it is very doubtful whether he ever met with the *Laokoön* or the theological controversies ; at any rate, he makes no mention of them in the "Critique of the Faculty of Judgment," nor in his "Religion within the Bounds of Pure Reason." The only places in Kant's works in which Lessing is mentioned are in the treatise "On Theory and Practice" (1793), — where praise is awarded to his hypothesis of the "Divine Education of the Human Race," — and in the "Critique of the Faculty of Judgment," in which Lessing is incidentally mentioned as a critic, together with Batteux (!). On this subject see the excellent essay of Johann Jacoby, entitled "*Kant und Lessing eine Parallele*" (Königsberg, 1859), in which the intellectual affinity of these two men is, for the first time, discussed.

It was wholly otherwise concerning the man with the refutation of whose theory Lessing began his *Laokoön*, and with the commendation of whom he, for the time being, concluded his work. The appearance of Winckelmann's *History of Art* interrupted the progress of *Laokoön*. "I shall not venture another step," exclaimed Lessing, "until I have read this work. To theorize about art from general conceptions merely, can lead only to caprices, which one must, sooner or later, to his confusion, find refuted in works of art. But when such a man carries forward the torch of history, speculation can boldly follow after." Never did one genius pay homage to another in a manner more free from envy than Lessing here does to Winckelmann, of whose great work he says, "The author, with the measureless range of his reading, and the most extended and finest knowledge of art, which he brought to his task, has also labored with the noble confidence of the ancient artists, who applied their industry to main points, and treated secondary matters either with intentional negligence, or gave them over entirely into other hands." Lessing's friends and acquaintances had expected in *Laokoön* a keen polemic against Winckelmann. They were not a little astonished to find, on the contrary, a reverence which entirely overlooked self, and even brought forward the isolated defects and errors of Winckelmann's work only to couple them with praise of the author. Meanwhile, however, a rumor of the anticipated severe criticism, circulated by the literary gossips, crossed the Alps, and reached the ears of Winckelmann, who, in his Roman isolation, and long estrangement from his fatherland, had hitherto scarcely heard the name of Lessing. At least, the first

intelligence that "a young poet," the tutor, or, as Winckelmann expressed himself, the "bear-leader" of a Halle student, had ventured to enter the lists against him "in matters of venerable antiquity and sublime art, which must forever remain a secret to such a man," was received with the utter contempt of one who knows that he is in the unmolested possession of an insight which, at that period, was shared by no other. But a few months afterwards he completely retracted his opinion. He had in the mean time himself received and read the *Laokoön*, and was magnanimous enough to acknowledge that his former judgment deserved forgiveness only on the ground that he had hitherto "unfortunately read nothing by this learned man," and indeed had known nothing about him; that Lessing wrote as any one might be proud to have written, and that he was a man by whom even to be esteemed worthy of criticism was an honor. He resolved to "make a worthy reply;" and he wished even to address him a personal letter, but was prevented by the intelligence that Lessing had left Berlin on a journey.\* It was not until a year after the death of this excellent man, "on whom," as Lessing wrote to a friend, "he would gladly have bestowed a few years of his own life," that Lessing was made aware of this honorable recognition through Gleim, who transcribed for him those epistolary expressions of Winckelmann. There was never any nearer acquaintance between the two scholars, however, although a meeting was in prospect in consequence of Winckelmann's call to Berlin. Indeed, it is evident, from subsequent remarks in Winckelmann's letters, that the deeper he penetrated into the

\* Winckelmann's Works, II. 602, 606, Stuttg. Ed.



Laokoön, the more ill at ease he felt in the presence of Lessing's mind ; since prophetic enthusiasm must always be somewhat uncomfortable before the keen reflections of analytical reason. It is therefore questionable whether a coöperation such as Goethe depicts at the close of "Winckelmann and his Century" could have been possible between two natures so fundamentally different, — between the rigidly philosophical analyzer of conceptions, and the inspired prophet and herald of the Beautiful, even if fate had brought them together. The interests of each, in relation to art, were as different as were their pursuits and characters. Winckelmann stood high above Lessing in comprehensive knowledge and contemplation of the works of ancient art ; but his general culture was one-sided, and his stand-point limited, in comparison with the universality of Lessing's mind, which never lost sight of the correlation of all knowledge and capacity, and drew into its range the whole realm of literature, art, and science. And with all the affinity between them on many points, Lessing's noble soul still towered far above the nature of his great contemporary in its entire freedom from egotism, personal vanity, and lust of power ; in its truly republican love of liberty, which granted to each what it demanded from all, namely, unlimited opportunity for the expression of opinion ; and in its generous appreciation and recognition of a kindred mind ; while Winckelmann, "who felt, and had a right to feel, as a king in his domain," \* separated from the intellectual movement of Germany, and spoiled by long-continued and unconditional reverence, would scarcely allow a Lessing to correct him, even in a few details.

\* Guhrauer, 97.

Lessing's entire attitude towards Winckelmann, — his honest adherence to his own principles, notwithstanding his admiration for the great scholar, — is expressed in a remark made about two years after the appearance of *Laokoön*, as he was about to commence the Italian journey already planned at Breslau; when he spoke of the error into which those persons had fallen who detected in this projected journey a plan for occupying at Rome the place of the recently deceased Winckelmann. "What has Winckelmann, or the plans which he made in Italy, to do with my journey?" he wrote to Ebert, October 18, 1768. "No one can esteem the man more highly than I do; nevertheless, I should dislike to be Winckelmann as much as I often do to be Lessing." With this sense of his own worth, it was easy for him, while revising for publication the letters of Winckelmann to Stosch, to allow the bitter utterances to which Winckelmann had given vent in his displeasure, to pass without comment. He even regarded it as a duty, by means of a new and improved edition of his *History of Art*, and other writings, to erect a memorial to the man, prematurely snatched from his great life-work by a terrible fate. In the execution of this generous design, he was stopped only by his own early death.\*

Before taking leave of the *Laokoön*, and turning to a narration of the circumstances by which Lessing's activity in this province was interrupted and turned into another channel, we cannot avoid referring, in a few words, to the charm which is diffused over this work; and which chains the reader with irresistible power even at this day, when the principles therein set forth have long since be-

\* Guhrauer, II. 1, 103, 309.

come the property of general culture, and his errors and defective views, as well as his depreciation of the modern theory of art, his unsatisfactory estimate of landscape, historical, and portrait painting, have been corrected and cleared up. This charm lies principally in the genuinely artistic manner of treating his subject; in the apparently wholly fortuitous nature of the conception and progress of the work. Lessing himself once compared his method to the windings of a promenade, which scarcely appears to have a definite direction; and nothing can be more apt than this comparison. Instead of the monotony of a tedious, straight, poplar-enclosed highway of paragraphs, which leads to the goal by the shortest road of abstract ideas, deduced from some ready-made principle, we follow the thinker through the pleasing mazes of his own investigations and reflections. This mode of instruction is the more fruitful the more it gives the learner a history of the origin and evolution of thought, instead of merely its results — the “history of the meditation” of the teacher, in which the goal is all along the way. It is true, the saunterer who guides us (to retain Lessing’s imagery) seems himself scarcely to have a purpose in his straying. But, better acquainted with the region than is the traveller on the highway, he knows, notwithstanding the apparent carelessness of his course, exactly whither, and to what highest and most beautiful points of view, he wishes to conduct us; and the meandering circuits in which he leads us serve only to disclose more completely to our view the concealed beauties and peculiarities, the whole wealth and varied character, of the landscape. In other words, Lessing, in the *Laokoön*, is also a critic in the greatest and

most comprehensive sense of the word, — a critic whose aim it is "to discover every perplexity and obscurity in scientific conceptions; to separate what is different, and thereby prepare the way for the knowledge and practice of the True and the Beautiful."\* Although in this method there is imminent danger of failing to attain systematic perfection, yet this danger is more than compensated for by the effect produced on all those who, like the apprentices of a master-sculptor, enter the workshop, and trace the whole process of creation. Goethe has said that art should be discussed only in presence of works of art. Lessing followed this principle in the *Laokoön*; and the manner in which he develops and illustrates each of his propositions, from the eternal types of Homer and Sophocles, allowing the reader to surround himself with the concrete reality and formation of the beautiful, contributes, not less than his method, to enliven interest and satisfy reason. And over the whole work presides, in mild dignity, a spirit of cheerful repose; the result of that contented state of mind with which Lessing, free from the pressure of a literary market and the exciting duties of journalism, devoted the leisure hours of his official station to the production of this labor of love. With the exception of a single satirical allusion to the talented poet Simonides, also notorious for his avarice, as "the Grecian Voltaire," we find him in this work at peace with all literature, and disposed to honor even a writer like Klotz with friendly regard — an act of magnanimity of which he was destined to repent, as we shall hereafter see.

Lessing's *Laokoön* is a work of art in criticism, as Lessing himself must be rightfully designated as the

\* Guhrauer, II. 1, 22.

*genius of criticism*; for he is at once *artist* and *critic*, — *artist*, by force of the inventive ingenuity of his investigation; *critic*, through the predominant power of his analytic understanding. Let us dwell a moment on the consideration of that faculty which has been characterized in Lessing as *creative criticism*; and which enables him to lay claim to the title of a *critical genius*. The reflections on this point are derived from the above-mentioned treatise of Johann Jacoby; \* whose treatment of the subject, in its inimitable clearness and acuteness, has been almost verbally retained.

With Lessing, as with Kant, his intellectually kindred contemporary, the goal of all endeavor is *self-knowledge*; that is, knowledge of the inner nature of man. Both Kant and Lessing seek to comprehend man in the totality of his powers of thought and feeling, in the full historical development of his spirit; whilst their opponents, the Enlighteners (*Aufklärer*), take into account only the intellectual side of man, only the mature stage of development. But whilst Kant, in the rough path of speculation, goes directly to the centre, Lessing seeks to reach the goal by pleasant and circuitous side-paths. Proceeding from single objects of art, from this or that literary production, — attaching himself to some special transient or controversial question, — his intuitive insight always penetrates to the kernel of the matter, and finds the general principle involved in every special case; and however wide his wanderings may appear, he always keeps the final mark distinctly before him. But the plan which he pursues in criticism is, with him, not merely the means to an end, but also an end in itself;

\* Kant und Lessing eine Parallele, 6-11.

not merely a standard for scientific or artistic activity, but science and a work of art. Criticism and poetical production go, with Lessing, hand in hand. His poems are masterpieces of criticism; his criticisms are finished works of art.

The very first impulse of which the critic is conscious is altogether an artistic one. The first look which Lessing casts on an object to be criticised excites him in the same manner as the first idea of a work of art to be created excites the practical artist. As the ideal appears spontaneously before the artist's eye as a beautifully ordered whole, without wearisome synthesis of its parts, so the result of his thought stands, from the first, entire before Lessing's clear understanding. With quick glance he seizes the coherent unity of the individual parts with the whole, and is inspired by the product of his criticism as the sculptor is by his ideal. It leaves him no repose until he has shaped out of his own idea a work perceptible to all. But how does he proceed in the labor? He himself has explained the process in that celebrated confession relative to the measure and the manner of his creative endowment which is found in the conclusion of the Hamburg Dramaturgy.

But a still deeper insight into the intellectual laboratory of the man is granted in a second confession, which he has bequeathed to us in a letter to his brother. He thus writes: "I do not believe that I have ever written anything more profound than my 'New Hypothesis concerning the Evangelists,'\* and, I may add, nothing more ingenious. I often wonder myself how naturally everything flows from a single observation

\* This treatise was not published till after Lessing's death.

which I *found made* by me, without really knowing how I came by it." This "observation" which Lessing "found made by himself" is nothing else than the idea of the work of artistic criticism; which, finished and perfect, rises suddenly in his consciousness. He wishes now to know *how* he has attained to it. For, though that observation came suddenly into his consciousness, yet it did not arise there suddenly. It must rather be the last link of a series of thoughts which have only vanished momentarily from his memory; it must have gradually grown up and attained maturity. His curiosity and impulse to investigation claim satisfactory answer. Indefatigably he digs after concealed roots in his soul; seeks, by severe self-introspection, — the habit of years, — to recall each individual link of the vanished series of thoughts, and does not rest until he has traced the idea back to its origin. To this end he needed the "squeezing and pumping" to which, as he remarks in that first confession, he was obliged to resort in order "to get anything out of himself." It was also necessary that he "be free from all other occupations, and from involuntary diversions; that he have all his reading at command; that he be able at every step quietly to run over old observations which he may at any time have made." But when he has thus satisfied his desire for knowledge by such survey of thought, then the artistic impulse to give it shape is excited in him. What now appears to the eye of his memory as a well-articulated whole, a finished production of his thought-life, must and will be made visible also to other eyes. In reversed order, he now describes the process of evolution of that idea, from its earliest germ to its perfection. And he

does this with such clearness, precision, and dramatic vivacity, that, in the contemplation of the finished work, the reader is able to enjoy a state of mind similar to that excited in Lessing when the dawning of that first idea awakened his speculative inspiration.



## CHAPTER V.

## CALL TO HAMBURG.

AFTER the failure of his hopes, Lessing could no longer be contented in Berlin. The soil burned under his feet. He wished to go away, — no matter whither, — for Berlin and Prussia had become utterly disagreeable to him ; and he never entirely lost his aversion to both. In the summer of 1766, in company with a rich young nobleman, who was on terms of friendship with him, and with whom he had lived for some time as an associate in Berlin, he made a journey to Pyrmont. During this journey he visited Göttingen and his old literary friend Michaelis, whom he had for some time been urging to his German translation of the Old Testament, with notes for the illiterate. He saw there his Leipsic friend Kästner again, and formed also with the learned connoisseur of romance literature, the Göttingen librarian Dietz, a friendly relation and a correspondence, of which, unfortunately, all of Lessing's letters but one have been lost. In Halberstadt he passed a few days pleasantly with his old friend Gleim ; who, as ever, was ready to aid him in his pecuniary perplexities, and who expressed, both in conversation and in poetry, his enthusiastic delight in the *Laokoön*, and above all things urged its author to remain in Berlin and Prussia, since the earnest admirer of Frederic II. could not believe it possible that

the great king should not desire to retain the greatest German author in his dominions. But Lessing knew better. On his return to Berlin, the apprehension that he would fail to receive the desired position became a certainty. In this condition, when he again "stood idle on the market-place, and no man wished to hire him," he received (in November, 1766) intelligence that the directors of the new Hamburg theatre had resolved to call him to Hamburg, with a salary of eight hundred thalers.

The man to whom belonged the honor of this suggestion, through which a short-lived theatrical enterprise was to live immortally in the history of German literature, was John Frederic Loewen — a literary gentleman of Hamburg, of the same age as Lessing, and favorably known by his satires and comic poems, his theatrical attempts, and, above all, by his romances. Loewen was an ardent friend of the theatre, which had then for a series of years received a considerable impulse at Hamburg. He was married to a very talented actress, the daughter of Schönemann, the director of the theatre; and this circumstance, as well as his intimate intercourse with the great histrionic artists Eckhof, Ackermann, Brückner, Borchers, and others, who, since 1756, had raised the Hamburg stage to be the first in Germany, promoted his theatrical tastes; which he sought to gratify as theatrical critic and dramaturgist, as theatrical poet, translator, and composer of prologues for the different wandering troupes which succeeded each other in those days in that city.\* Encouraged by Eckhof, he had, as early as 1755, written the outline of a work on theatrical imitation — the first attempt of the kind in

\* Devrient, *Geschichte d. deutschen Schauspielkunst*, Vol. II. 97, 129, 154.

German literature : still more important, however, was his "History of the German Theatre," which he published eleven years afterwards as an introduction to his dramatic works ; for this treatise contained the programme of a thorough reform of German theatrical concerns which Loewen purposed in Hamburg. He marked out as its chief objects the founding of a genuine German theatre ; that is, of original German plays of national interest and character, instead of everlasting translations and French imitations ; and, secondly, a permanent stage as a public institution, supported by the state, to supersede the then itinerant directors and vagabondizing troupes of actors. He insisted also upon intellectual and moral elevation of the rank of actors by the establishment of actors' schools, and by severe moral censorship. It does not diminish the merit of the man, that his proposition to substitute a permanent theatre for itinerant companies had already been discussed, twenty years before, by the poet John Elias Schlegel ; and it redounds to the honor of his judgment, that his opinions on this subject agreed with those of such men as Herder and Lessing.\* Indeed, Loewen has not been quite fairly treated by those who have more recently written the history of the culture of this period. Neither Gervinus nor Devrient acknowledges with sufficient emphasis that Germany owes Lessing's Dramaturgy to this man. Lessing himself mentions him in his Dramaturgy with respect, as a fine intellect ; as a poet, "who, better than any one else, knows how to enliven profound understanding with wit, and to season earnest reflection with pleasant humor." He may, indeed, be insignificant as a dramatic poet ;

\* Guhrauer, II. 113.

yet it is greatly to his credit that, as such, he recognized the transcendent genius of Lessing, although Minna von Barnhelm had not yet appeared. Even his opponent Schröder does justice to his capacity as a cultivated and thoughtful dramaturgist, and to his honest purpose to help the good cause.\* It was, moreover, no small thing that he who had hitherto played the first part in dramaturgical matters at Hamburg could evince the self-renunciation to place at the head of his own theatrical enterprise a man like Lessing, who was personally a stranger, and who was sure to eclipse him utterly.

Concerning this enterprise, the circumstances are as follows: Moved by Loewen's untiring zeal, twelve citizens of Hamburg, with the merchant Seyler at their head, had combined to establish a permanent German "national theatre," after the plan proposed by Loewen. They rented from the manager of the Hamburg stage, the well-known Ackermann, the theatre with its decorations and wardrobe; and retained him for the new establishment, together with his talented and well-disciplined troupe. Besides the advantage of a permanent theatre, support in old age was promised to deserving actors; and for the encouragement of native dramatic production, a yearly prize of fifty ducats was fixed for the best German tragedy or comedy. The expensive ballet was entirely excluded from the new undertaking as a corruption of good taste; whereby was lost the great talent of young Schröder, who left Hamburg on that account. A committee of the founders, with Seyler at their head, assumed financial control; while Loewen received the technical directorship; in which capacity he was authorized

\* Schröder's Leben. I. 180.

to open negotiations with Lessing with respect to the position of dramaturgist and adviser. He wrote (November 4, 1766) to Nicolai, and sent the programme of the enterprise, begging him to sound Lessing on the subject. The consequence was, that Lessing resolved to go to Hamburg, and see matters there with his own eyes. He went at the beginning of December, and remained there till towards the end of January. Even in the first weeks of his sojourn he wrote to his brother Charles, who had remained in Berlin, that "the affair takes a very good course, and that it depends wholly upon himself to conclude it under the most favorable conditions." "But you know," he continues, "that with me clinking profit is by no means the chief object; and after it arise other doubts, which must first be allayed before I can fully make up my mind." These doubts had reference to the intention of the Hamburg managers to put him under obligations to furnish a series of original dramas for the new stage. Lessing rejected this suggestion at once, and decidedly. He did not feel competent, as he said, to become the Goldoni of the new German National Theatre; and, as he afterwards confessed, he would not have been willing even if he had been able. But at the same time he declared himself ready to devote to the theatre all his powers as critic; and finally this offer was accepted. The fruit of it was — the Hamburg Dramaturgy.

Lessing returned well satisfied to Berlin. The prospect of a future free from care, and an eminently congenial occupation, put him into the most cheerful mood; which reveals itself unmistakably in the first letter addressed to Gleim after his return. "I have so much to tell you," he writes, "that I know not where to begin.

Yes, I have been in Hamburg ; and in nine or ten weeks I expect to return thither, probably to remain there forever." That he had found an opportunity honorably to leave Berlin, where he had been so unworthily treated, made him completely happy. "I hope it will not be hard for me to forget Berlin. My friends there will always be dear to me, will always remain my friends ; but all else, from the least to the greatest — Yet I remember that you dislike to hear any one betray any displeasure towards this queen of cities. What had I to seek on this desperate galley? Do not ask me for what I am going to Hamburg. Really for nothing. If they only do not take anything from me at Hamburg, they will give me just as much as they have given me here. Yet I will not conceal anything from you. To tell the truth, I have come to a sort of agreement with the new theatre there, which promises me for several years a quiet and pleasant life. When I was concluding the contract with them, there came into my mind the words of Juvenal: '*Quod non dant proceres dabit histrio.*'\*" I shall there finish and bring on to the stage my theatrical works, which have long awaited my final correction. Such circumstances were necessary to revive in me my almost extinguished love for the theatre. I was just beginning to lose myself in other studies, which would very soon have rendered me incapable of all labors of genius. My *Laokoön* is now a secondary work again. Methinks I shall have its continuation ready soon enough for the great mass of our readers. The few who have read me understand as much of the

\* Juven. Sat. VII. 90. "What princes do not grant, the actor will give." Lessing of course refers to the conduct of Frederic the Great in the matter of the librarianship.

matter as I do myself, and even more." When, subsequently, we find him, in a moment of dejection, caused by the failure of the Hamburg enterprise, apparently desirous to renounce even the name of poet, we must remember that here he mentions his vocation of dramatic poet as his proper life-calling. Since he could not wholly conceal from himself the financial uncertainty of his new position, he at the same time formed the plan of helping his pecuniary condition by an industrial enterprise to be founded on his own responsibility.

At Hamburg he had made the acquaintance of Bode, a native of Brunswick, but who for a long time had been living in the former city as literary editor of a newspaper, and translator of English works, and who just then, by a wealthy marriage, had attained means to establish a printing-house, which was to be connected with the new theatrical enterprise, and be sustained by it. With this man Lessing resolved to form a copartnership, and to enlarge the printing-house to a sort of publishing establishment for the issue of his own works and those of his friends. We shall see hereafter that the execution of this plan, so far from granting the desired advantages, was destined only to increase his embarrassments.

Meanwhile he hastened to prepare for his removal to Hamburg. He arranged a complete collective edition of his comedies, in two volumes (published at Berlin by Voss, 1767) ; in which, besides the juvenile efforts of that early period, *Minna von Barnhelm* appeared for the first time. This complete edition, which reminded the nation of the merits of the new dramaturgist of the first German National Theatre, was at the same time to furnish him with the necessary means to enter upon his new office.

But the receipts were not sufficient, and he was obliged to sell his library accumulated at Breslau. Of the six thousand volumes which it contained he kept nothing, except what he absolutely needed for the labors just before him. "It goes to my heart," he wrote to Gleim, "that I am obliged to deprive myself of them, and especially that I must let them go in a place where books have no value. But what is to be done?" The worthy Gleim helped him so far as he could, and was in despair that he could not preserve to his friend the entire library, which was sacrificed at the ridiculously low price of a few hundred thalers in order to pay debts and rent. But Lessing was not disturbed by any of these troubles. Even the prospect of an appointment as professor of archæology and inspector of art-collections at Cassel could not induce him to take back his word given at Hamburg, although the advantages of such a position, which Hagedorn made plain in a letter to Nicolai, could not be denied. He was too full of the new change in his life offered him by the Hamburg enterprise. Given to illusions as he was, the free situation there, dependent upon no prince's favor, seemed far preferable in his eyes to the yoke of an official; and even a more far-sighted man than he could not have anticipated the speedy failure of the theatrical undertaking. We must also take into consideration that, from the beginning of his career, the theatre had been a favorite theme with Lessing. "No one of his aims," remarks, very justly, the historian of the German theatre,\* "did he pursue with such devoted persistency; and nothing did he make so completely his life-mission as the untiring endeavor to revive,

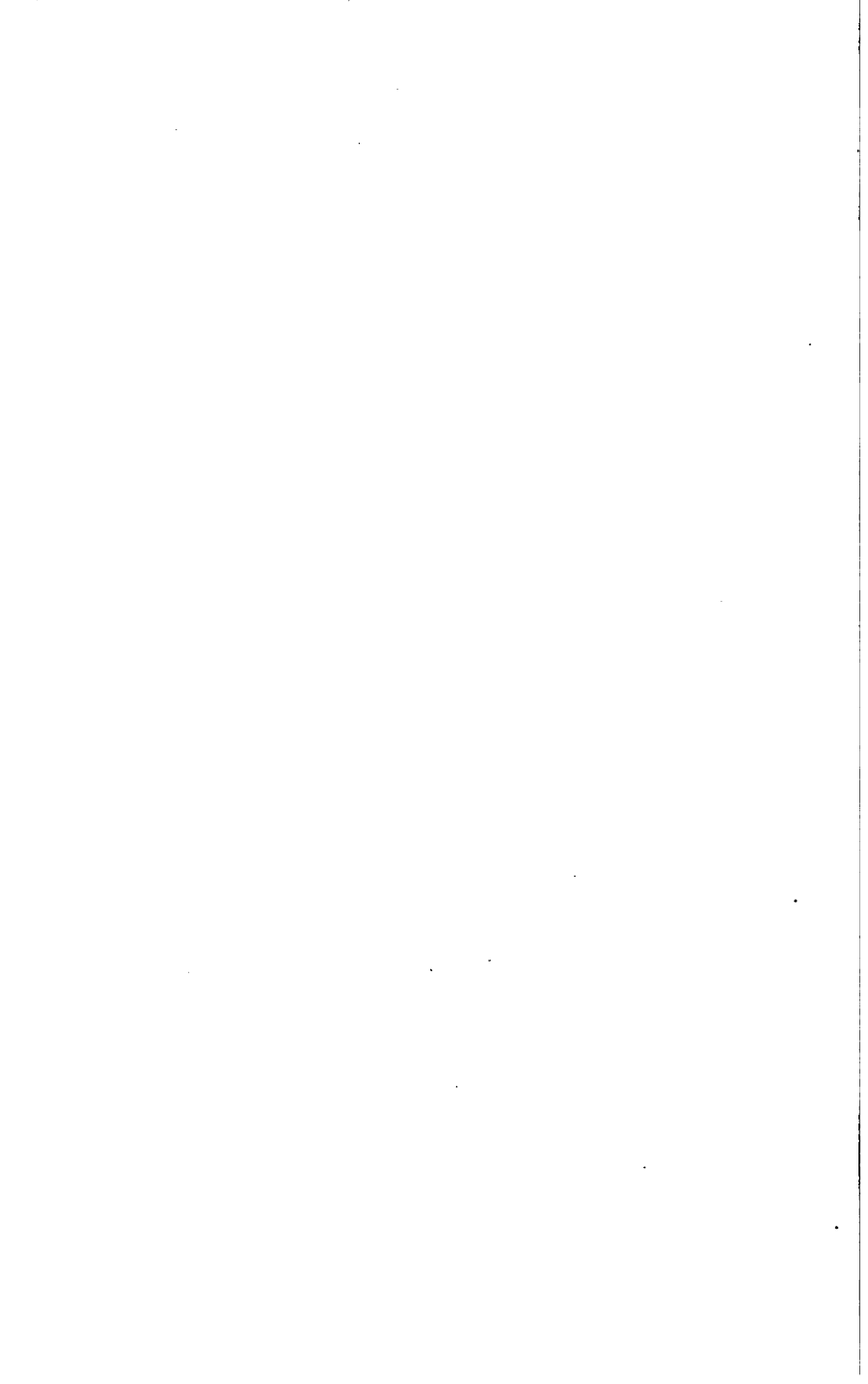
\* Devrient, II. 121.



thoroughly and independently, the national stage." He believed that he had found at Hamburg the firm standpoint of which he had hitherto been so painfully deprived; namely, a permanent theatre, provided with the best artistic powers of Germany, directed to the object of raising the stage to the highest perfection of social tastes, to be a worthy mirror of national life; and for himself, incentive and leisure for the completion of his numerous dramatic sketches, and opportunity to test the effect of his works by immediate actual representation. The cheerful state of mind produced by these prospects is evinced by an anecdote preserved to us by Charles Lessing. A jovial society of good friends, among whom was Ramler, were discussing the best materials for the drama. Lessing, who, in conversation, loved to put forward and defend paradoxes, asserted that any material is sufficient, provided the poet knows how to make it fruitful; for not the material, but the elaboration of it, is the chief concern. His friends protested in a lively manner against this assertion, which was only the product of a wanton caprice, and which, indeed, appears in striking contrast with Lessing's real view concerning the great importance to the dramatist of a happily chosen subject, as we find it expressed by him in the *Dramaturgy*. Ramler challenged him to prove his theory by practice, and to compose a comedy of which the subject should be a sleeping-draught. Lessing declared his readiness, and immediately set to work. Thus arose, like Goethe's *Clavigo*, the comedy "The Sleeping-draught;" which, however, like most of Lessing's dramatic labors, remained a fragment. External causes prevented the completion of the piece, already partly

printed ; and to be honest, literature lost but little by the interruption ; for this later essay at comedy shows, in every respect, a great deterioration from *Minna von Barnhelm*. It was Lessing's last comedy. His fate from this period induced another mood, which was widely different from the cheerful freedom and joyous delight to which his *Minna von Barnhelm* owed its existence. His dramatic productivity, in general, ceased for a long time ; and when, five years afterwards, his interest was again aroused in this direction, it was tragedy—his *Faust* and *Emilia Galotti*—with which he sought to approximate the highest effort of all poetry.

In the first days of April, 1767, Lessing left Berlin, which henceforth he was to see only as a stranger. He left without bidding farewell to his brother Charles. Taking leave was, as he himself confessed, a pain which he wished to avoid whenever it was possible. "You have probably heard from Herr Ramler," he wrote to his brother after his arrival in Hamburg, on the day before the opening of the theatre, "how it happened that I was obliged to depart without even speaking to you again. All that brothers have to say to each other in separating is understood between us without explanation."



GOTTHOLD EPHRAIM LESSING.

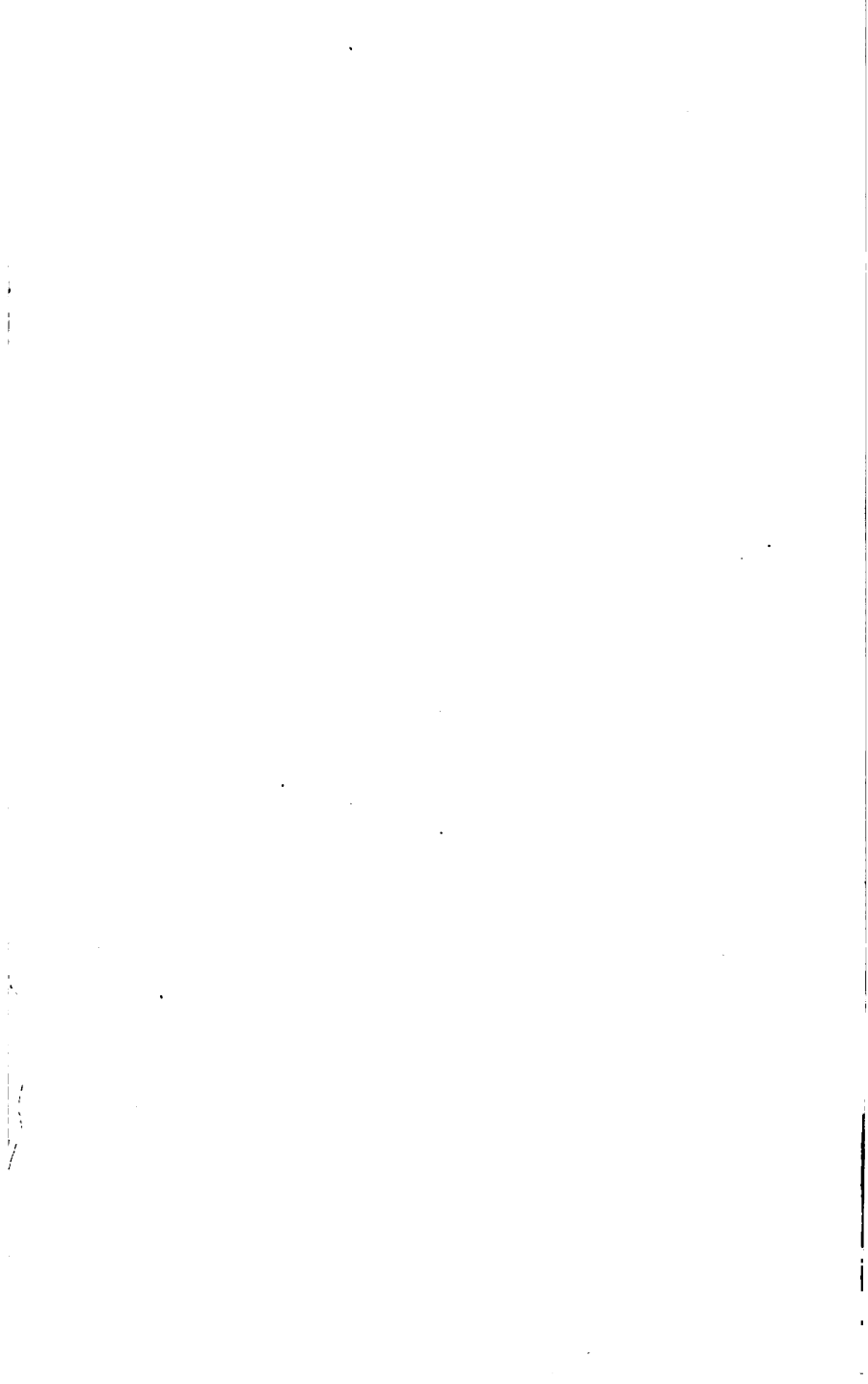
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BOOK SEVENTH.

LESSING IN HAMBURG — THE DRAMATURGY.

1767 — 1770.

( 301 )



## CHAPTER I.

### THE NATIONAL THEATRE IN HAMBURG.

LESSING had come to Hamburg with bright prospects and joyful expectations. For never had a position been more congenial, a task more delightful, than that which seemed to await him here. The fresh confidence, the cheerful courage, which inspired him, are expressed in the "Announcement" with which, on the day before the opening of the theatre—the 22d of April—he prefaced his Dramaturgy. The whole greatness of the man's character comes before us in this brief "Announcement," which is a masterpiece at once of popular eloquence and far-sighted prudence. He characterizes the work to which he intends to devote his powers as a national enterprise, which should therefore be welcomed and furthered by all the best citizens of Germany. With the whole force of his vivid eloquence he drowned the voices of those envious enemies who had intrigued against the new attempt, even in its incipient state. All those who, in like manner, hasten to cast the stone of ill-will and suspicion at every struggle for general good can take to themselves the branding denunciation of Lessing, when he exclaims, "To be sure, there are always and everywhere persons who, judging others by themselves, detect a selfish purpose in every good undertaking. We are willing to allow them all the

comfort they can find in such thoughts. But when their malicious envy, not content with attacking the motives of the actors in any great enterprise, endeavors also to cause that enterprise to fail, then they must be told that they are the most contemptible members of human society." With a fine turn of language, he appealed to the honor of Hamburg as a free city, by praising it as the place "where these miserable persons do not give the tone to public sentiment; where the prevailing numbers of well-disposed citizens keep them within the limits of decency, and do not allow the general welfare to fall a prey to their cabals, nor patriotic efforts to become a target for their derisive wit." With pungent brevity he shows what advantages and improvements could accrue to the German theatre from the new project, if only the sympathy of the people be secured. In the noblest democratic spirit he challenges the public to a scrutinizing and criticising participation; promising that its voice shall never be lightly esteemed, nor its judgment be heard without receiving due consideration. "Only," he adds, "every petty critic must not regard himself as the popular voice; and let him whose expectations are disappointed consider somewhat of what nature his expectations were. Not every amateur is a connoisseur; not every person who appreciates the beauties of one piece, and the excellence of one actor, can, on that account, estimate the worth of all others. A one-sided taste is often productive of unjust prejudices. That only is the true taste which recognizes beauties of every kind, yet expects from none, greater pleasure than its nature allows it to grant." As regards his promises, their moderation and modesty are scarcely comprehensible to our age of

pretence. In an undertaking the greatest of its kind, aiming at a thorough reform of the German theatre, supported by considerable means, favored by the coöperation of a company of actors such as Germany never before possessed, with the first of German writers and poets at their head as dramaturgist, he claims, or rather begs for, nothing more than — forbearance and patience ! Much is to be done, he says ; for there are many steps which a nascent stage has to ascend before it reaches perfection ; and the German theatre has a still harder task to perform, since it is in a deteriorated rather than a nascent state. Nor can everything be done at once. " Yet what one does not see growing, one finds, after a time, grown. The slowest traveller, who keeps the goal in sight, always goes faster than he who wanders without aim."

This announcement attained its object, at least in some degree. The enemies of the new enterprise kept silent after the thunderbolt of excommunication which Lessing had hurled against them ; and so long as he really belonged to the Hamburg theatre, both friends and foes left its affairs to be managed by him alone.

The "Hamburg Recreations," a journal in which Eschenburg and Loewen were assisted by Boie, Eberling, and Schiebler, abstained from all discussion of the theatre ; inasmuch as they referred, once for all, to Lessing's Dramaturgy as to a work which rendered all other intelligence and criticism superfluous.\* Not until the following year, when Lessing had given up his original plan of accompanying the representations of the theatre with his criticisms, did Loewen consent to write notices of the

\* Guhrauer, II. 140.



plays in the above-mentioned journal. They were, indeed, a great contrast to Lessing's *Dramaturgy*. For this reason they won the approbation of Klotz, who lauded them in the highest style in the same *Library of Polite Letters* which had from the first conducted a systematic opposition to Lessing.\* Lessing left no means untried to secure and preserve a good understanding with the public. He explained beforehand the necessity of sometimes representing mediocre and even feeble pieces. He showed that selection presupposes a multitude from which to choose, and that choice is not easy on account of the poverty of German dramatic literature. However, it is already an advance, if the commonplace is recognized as such; and the discontented spectator may at least learn thereby to form a correct judgment. In order to cultivate the taste of a man of sound understanding, it is necessary only to explain why a certain thing has not pleased him. We know in what a masterly manner Lessing discharged this part of his task in the *Dramaturgy*. In opposition to the passionate attacks which the theatre had to experience at that time, especially in Hamburg, from bigoted ecclesiastics, he willingly consented that, on the occasion of the opening, the stage should be portrayed by Loewen, in the prologue and epilogue, as a moral institution, and the drama be considered and celebrated, "in its highest worthiness, as a supplement of the laws."† He even seized the opportunity offered by the first representation to pay his compliments to the clergy; and in the first sheets of his *Dramaturgy* offered them, as a police of morals, the

\* *Briefe an Klotz*, II. 8.

† *Guhrauer*, II. 140, calls Dusch the author of the Epilogue. Lessing, on the contrary, attributes both poems to Loewen.

requisite guarantees. In the opening play, by Cronegk, the line "Heaven can forgive, but a priest never" had elicited from the assembled public a round of applause. Lessing disapproved of all this. He also censured the poet; who, however, had only expressed a proposition which still passes as an axiom in the paradise of the priesthood,\* and the truth of which this noble man was destined, a few years later, to prove most bitterly in his own experience. It is affecting to see how generously he here takes this assailed class under his protection. He would not even allow as a valid excuse that in the drama it is not the poet himself who speaks, and that his personages must act in conformity with their characters; for poetic license must not be allowed to depart so far from absolute truth as to assume that a man can wish to do evil for evil's sake. "If Ismenor is a cruel priest, are therefore all priests Ismenors? Let it not be objected that here only priests of a false religion are referred to. No religion has yet been so false that its teachers must necessarily be monsters. In false as well as in true religions, priests have done evil, not because they were priests, but because they were villains, who would have abused the privileges of any situation through their evil dispositions. If the stage be allowed to utter such reckless judgments concerning priests in general, what wonder if many of that class condemn the theatre as the broad road to hell?"

This was the result in Hamburg, in spite of all Lessing's prudence, as we shall hereafter see. But he himself was spared by the fanatical watchman of Zion, who, indeed, expressly mentioned his dramatical

\* See Stahr's *Ein Jahr in Italien*, III. 265.

writings, together with those of Gellert and Weisse, as excepted from the general anathema which he hurled against the German stage; and who left his dramaturgical activity undisturbed, whilst poor Loewen was obliged to suffer.\*

With self-sacrificing labor, Lessing devoted himself to the new work. He even broke off almost entirely, at least for a time, his correspondence with his Berlin friends.† But a harder trial than unremitting labor or the sacrifice of friendly communication was the care and anxiety attendant upon his commercial connection with Bode. Much precious time was lost also in the merely external duties of his position, such as correspondence relative to engagements, &c.; while the constant importunities of his family left no repose to the tormented man; so that, as he once wrote to his father, he was often "exhausted in body and soul." Worst of all was the conviction, too soon forced upon his mind, that he had deceived himself with regard to the practicability of his plans. Great pioneers always come forward at the right time for humanity, but, on that very account, too early for their personal happiness. This was Lessing's fate in more than one respect. This new misfortune was only another link in the chain of disappointments that extended through his whole life, because of his being always and everywhere in advance of his age and circumstances. Only four weeks after the opening of the new theatre he wrote to his brother, in strictest

\* Briefe an Klotz, II. 9-12.

† For nine months of the year 1767, spent in Hamburg, we have only four letters from Lessing — three to his brother, and one to his father; of letters to him, only one — from Karl Lessing. But many of Lessing's letters, like those addressed to Nicolai and Voss, have been lost.

confidence, that he scarcely knew what to say about his affairs. "Many things take place that do not suit me. Discord prevails among the directors, and no one knows cook from waiter."

A few weeks afterwards he was deserted by the chief manager, who failed to sustain him in certain strictures which had excited the anger of an over-sensitive actress; and he was therefore obliged to give up his special task of criticising the performances, and of striving for the promotion of the art of dramatic representation. This inconvenience might have been passed over, however, as it did not essentially injure the most important fruit of his activity, the Dramaturgy; but it was followed by the shipwreck of the whole undertaking, and that too in a much shorter time than the least hopeful had anticipated. We cannot stop here to narrate the several causes of the failure. They belong to the special history of the German theatre. The principal cause, according to Lessing's own testimony, was the want of culture, sympathy, and support on the part of the public; which, as always in such cases, saw too late what it had lost by its own fault; and which only came to its senses when, ten years afterwards, Lessing and his associates had again failed in attempting to insure the success of Schröder's theatre. In vain had Lessing appealed to patriotic feeling in behalf of an enterprise of national significance. The narrow, shopkeeper spirit of the Hamburg merchants had no ears for such a call. Hamburg was not an Athens, nor its burgomaster a Pericles; to say nothing of the "noble" Andreas von Stock, who, as plenipotentiary of the Holy Roman Empire, reproached the magistracy of Hamburg because they had dared even to

receive a petition of Lessing for freedom from the censorship.

After two months, Lessing expresses himself, in the *Dramaturgy*, respecting the conduct of the Hamburg public. He, the inveterate enemy of the French, — principally because he was indignant at the servility of the Germans towards everything foreign, — was forced to make a comparison, wherein, as regards cultivated patriotism, the Germans appeared as barbarians in contrast to the French. It was in reviewing Du Belloy's *Zelmire* that Lessing gave vent to his feelings. The name of the poet whose drama, "The Siege of Calais," had excited, two years before, in Paris, and indeed in all France, a storm of patriotic applause, and was also given in Germany with great splendor, was now in everybody's mouth.\* "Even if this piece were worthless," says Lessing, "it would still be a credit to the French that they applaud it so highly. It proves them to be a people jealous of national fame, on whom the great deeds of their ancestors have not lost their impression; who are convinced of the value of poetry, and the good influence of the drama on virtue and morals; and who do not consider the poet as a useless member of society, nor the theatre as among those objects which only busy idlers care for. How far behind the French are we Germans in this respect! *To tell the truth, we are, compared with them, nothing but barbarians; and even more barbarous than our barbaric forefathers, with whom a minstrel was highly esteemed; who, with all their indifference towards arts and sciences, would*

\* Schröder's *Leben*, I. 151. Concerning Du Belloy, see Arnd's *Geschichte der französischen Nationalliteratur*, II. 277.

have regarded him as a fool who should ask whether a bard, or a man dealing in bearskins and amber, is the more to be esteemed. Let me look where I will in Germany, the city is yet to be built from which we might expect a thousandth part of the gratitude towards a German poet which Calais has manifested for Du Belloy. Call it French vanity! *How far must we yet advance before we shall be capable of such vanity!* But what wonder? Even our scholars are so petty as to encourage the nation in the depreciation of everything that does not directly fill the purse. Mention a work of genius; talk of the encouragement of artists; express the wish that a flourishing city might, merely by its sympathy, foster the most respectable recreation for business men, who have borne the burden and heat of the day, and the most useful pastime for others who have no desire to labor at all (for *that*, at least, the theatre can be), — then look about you, and listen. ‘Heaven be praised,’ exclaims, not alone, the usurer Albinus, ‘that our citizens have more important things to do!’ More important? More lucrative, I readily grant. Nothing among us, which has the least connection with the liberal arts, is lucrative. But

‘hæc animos ærugo et cura peculi  
Quum semel imbuerit —’ \*

But I forget myself: what has all this to do with Zelmire?”

\* These words are a part of the following verses (330–332) in the *Ars Poetica* of Horace:—

“An, hæc animos ærugo et cura peculi  
Quum semel imbuerit, speramus carmina fingi  
Posse linenda cedro, et levi servanda cupresso?”

When once the rust and care of gain have invested the soul, can we hope to be able to compose poems worthy of being anointed with oil of cedar, and preserved in cases of polished cypress?—TRANS.

With *Zelmire*, to be sure, all this had nothing to do ; but it belonged truly to the characterization of the conduct manifested by the Hamburg public towards the patriotic enterprise of a German national theatre ; which, a few months after its opening, began to hasten towards destruction. As early as September, the capital of the founders was consumed ; and since no support came from the Hamburg *Crœsuses*, they were forced to the most desperate measures. Since they were abandoned by the cultivated classes in their endeavors for the elevation of taste, they appealed to the sympathy of the masses, as to a sheet-anchor in impending shipwreck. *Harlequinades* were given ; the ballet, and even rope-dancers, introduced ; and Lessing lived to see acrobats desecrate the stage on which his *Minna von Barnhelm* had, that very day, been represented !

Alas for the poet ! the painful comparison between German and French culture was exemplified before him, even while he wrote it down ! For while all France was rejoicing over a patriotic play, in Hamburg the representation of *Minna von Barnhelm*, the first national German drama, had just been prohibited ! The magistrates were unwilling to incur the danger of permission, since the Prussian resident refused his consent (notwithstanding Lessing's written and verbal remonstrance), because he had received no authorization from Berlin. Not until four months afterwards was the permission finally granted.\* Meanwhile the German theatre approached its dissolution with rapid steps. It

\* It was represented, for the first time, at Hamburg, on the twenty-eighth of September ; and, during the next ten weeks, repeated " only five times ; " which, as Schröder's biographer observes, cannot be regarded as very complimentary to the public taste.

could no longer be maintained by its few patrons among the *élite* of cultivated people, who, on account of their interest, were nicknamed "connoisseurs." And when, at length, a troupe of French actors arrived, towards the close of the year, at Hamburg, and attracted the concourse of good society, the German company were compelled to close the stage on the 4th of December; whereupon the troupe was transferred to Hanover for the winter, where they played with great applause, and received in Schröder a new and important accession.

Lessing, however, remained at Hamburg, where he was fettered by his connection with Bode's printing-house. His condition was melancholy in more than one respect. On account of the disordered financial relations of the establishers of the theatre, it was useless to speak of the payment of the salary which had been promised him. The rest of the money derived from the sale of his library he had invested, to the last farthing, in the printing-house; and had even borrowed money on credit for the same business, the payment of which oppressed him severely. He was living in a strange place; where, as he wrote to his family, he had but very few acquaintances, and those not wealthy, to whom he could unbosom himself, and whose assistance he could claim in case of extreme need. To crown all came the ruin of the theatre; whose removal from Hamburg had seemed to him, in September, so improbable, that, at the very time when it was decided upon, he was enthusiastically engaged in completing his *Faust*, in order to have it ready for representation during the winter. His despondency over the failure of his hopes



is expressed in a letter to his father, written at the close of the year, to congratulate him on the semi-centennial jubilee of his pastorate.

Meanwhile he worked away on his Dramaturgy ; in which, for some time, he had not kept up with the representations. He wished, by the continued publication of these papers, to keep alive in the citizens of Hamburg the recollection of their theatre until the troupe should return there at the end of the winter. The return took place in May, 1768 ; but the destruction of the enterprise could no longer be prevented. The repeated appeals to patriotism from the stage in Loewen's prologues died away unheard. Loewen himself resigned his place, and retired to Rostock, where he died two years afterwards. Lessing alone clung to the theatre to the last ; which finally received its death-blow by the disputes of the Hamburg clergy, and the fanatical attacks carried on in the filthiest language by the chief pastor, Götze, against any patronage of the drama. We find Lessing's mood expressed in a letter to Nicolai, wherein he calls upon his friend to witness the destruction of the theatre. "I should think," he wrote at the end of September, 1768, "that you might come to Hamburg to behold our theatre, which also goes up at Easter. Would that it might all be over with at once !" On the 25th of November the theatre was closed with a piece by Weisse, half a year sooner than Lessing had expected. Thus he was again one illusion poorer ! *Transeat cum cæteris erroribus !* (Let it go with the other deceptions ! ) was the brief funeral speech with which, in his letter to Ramler, he gave up the dream of creating a national theatre

for the Germans. To be sure, he did not like to narrate the whole failure of the enterprise in the Dramaturgy; but at its close he could not refrain from telling the Hamburg public and the German nation a few truths which still echo in our ears. "If the public asks, 'What has been accomplished?' and replies with a derisive 'Nothing!' then I ask again, 'What has the public done *in order* that something might be accomplished? *Nothing* — and worse than nothing. Not enough that it did not promote the work, — it did not even leave it to its natural course! O, the sublime idea of creating a national theatre for Germany, when we are not yet even a nation! I am speaking, not of their political situation, but *merely* of their moral character.\* One might almost say that this consists in not wishing to possess any distinctive character. We are still the sworn imitators of everything foreign, and especially the abject admirers of the never-sufficiently-to-be-admired French. All that comes to us from the other side of the Rhine is beautiful, charming, delightful, divine; we would rather abnegate sight and hearing than regard it otherwise; rather be persuaded to accept coarseness for simplicity, impudence for grace, grimace for expression, a jingle of rhymes for poetry, howling for music, than to doubt in the least the superiority with which this amiable people, this "first people of the world," as it is very modestly wont to call itself, is endowed by a righteous fate in all that is good, and beautiful, and sublime, and seemly. The bright dream of establishing a national theatre at Hamburg has vanished; and so far as I have become acquainted with

\* This "merely" is very significant.

this city, it is the very last place where such a dream will be realized."

But though, in contemplating the lamentable ruin of a project so hopefully begun, Lessing might at first yield to a mood corresponding to Goethe's well-known line, "A great expenditure has been disgracefully squandered!" yet after-experience was to teach him that his attempt to found a worthy and permanent theatre was not without lasting results. As the historian of the German theatre has justly observed, its predominating thought, having once been called into being, demanded, like all truth, future realization, in spite of present failure. "The histrionic art, especially, had thereby won indubitable advantages. Lessing's Dramaturgy had given to the national spirit of the Hamburg school full confidence; Minna von Barnhelm had given it artistic realization; and thus this sorrowful episode in Lessing's life marks, nevertheless, one of the most cheering periods in the evolution of the German drama."\* For although he was compelled too soon "to withdraw his hand from this plough," yet through his labors the drama had been advanced, once for all, in the interests of German literature and culture; and an urgent impulse had been given to all those efforts by means of which, in the course of the next sixty or seventy years, a series of distinguished minds among our people, Schiller, Goethe, Tieck, and Immermann, were to employ themselves so fruitfully in the elevation of the German stage.

\* Devrient, II. 189.

## CHAPTER II.

## FATE OF THE DRAMATURGY.

THE Dramaturgy, the most splendid fruit of the shipwrecked adventure, still remained as a rich bequest to our nation. To be sure this work of Lessing, as well as the Laokoön, lies before us as a torso; and, like the Laokoön, has its history; which is already explained by the rapid destruction of the first national theatre, narrated in the preceding chapter. But this explanation is incomplete. It is supplemented by Lessing's relation to the actors, which we shall discuss in the following chapter, and by the condition of the press of that time. The first thirty numbers of the dramaturgical periodical, published in sheets, had scarcely appeared when the piratical publishers seized upon it as a good prize. Not only in Leipsic, but even in Hamburg itself, the Dramaturgy was pirated; and Lessing was compelled to appeal, in the Hamburg newspaper, to the German sense of honor, with the observation that he could not, indeed, forbid the public to favor the pirated impression, but wished them to reflect that by this means they would *necessarily deprive themselves of the work*. For if the number of copies requisite to defray the expenses could not be disposed of, it would inevitably be suspended.

To the disgrace of German national feeling, this

request was wholly disregarded! We have Lessing's positive declaration on this point. "It is the simple truth," he says, at the close of the *Dramaturgy*, "that the reprint is *the only cause* why the publication of this work has been delayed hitherto, and why it is now wholly suspended."

The theatre had defrayed the expenses of the sheet in the hope of receiving a considerable remuneration. But even this modest desire was frustrated. The public admired the work, but purchased the cheap reprint. With bitter resignation Lessing declared that he was not at all angry that he could no longer dispose of the material collected for the continuation of the work. "I withdraw my hand from this plough as willingly as I took hold of it. Klotz and company wish, besides, that I had never engaged in the matter. The world loses nothing from the fact that, instead of five or six volumes of *Dramaturgy*, I can produce only two. But it might have lost something if a more useful work of a better writer had thus been brought to a close; and there are always to be found people who would plan expressly so that the most worthy undertaking should and must fail."

It was not without reason that he mentioned "Klotz and company" in this connection; for it is more than probable that the reprint conducted by the firm of Dodsley and Co., as well as the appeal issued by them to all German publishers to hinder authors from being their own publishers (as Lessing had attempted), by pirating their works, was favored by Klotz and his clique. An evidence of this is the derisive manner in which Klotz discussed the subject in his German

Library ; and, in general, he was very assiduous in representing literary piracy as a matter of indifference to authors.\*

It is comprehensible that, under such circumstances, Lessing was obliged to renounce his plan of continuing the *Dramaturgy* to the end of Seyler's theatrical enterprise. The two volumes extant contain only the discussions of the dramas presented on the first fifty-two evenings (from April 22 to July 28, 1767). The criticism of the acting he was compelled to abandon after the first few weeks, for reasons which we have already intimated, and shall learn more fully hereafter.

After this time he remained constantly behind in the publication of the separate sheets. In June, 1768, the *Dramaturgy* had reached only the eighty-first article ; the rest of the second volume was to follow in a few weeks, but was delayed still for ten months ; so that, as Lessing confessed, the last sheets were written almost a year later than is indicated by their date (April 19, 1768). For the end of the second volume did not appear till Easter Day, 1769 ; at which time Lessing, incited by his controversy with Klotz, was already absorbed again in antiquarian studies which had been laid aside since the *Laokoön*. He was also contemplating a long absence from Germany, in order to carry out his plan of a journey to Italy and Greece.

The breaking off of the *Dramaturgy* was, indeed, an irreparable loss for German literature. Even Lessing's perfidious adversaries and their standard-bearer, Klotz, who had abandoned themselves to the most unworthy

\* *Deutsche Bibl.* II. 60. Compare, also, IV. 346, of the same journal, where a reprint of Lessing's poems is purposely noticed.

attacks against his work, and had contributed to disgust him with it, could not but acknowledge this; and they even declared that all the numerous imitations of the *Dramaturgy* which had shot up like mushrooms all over Germany, were far from being able to offer any indemnification for the cessation of Lessing's undertaking.\*

So much for the external history of the *Dramaturgy*. Before we turn to the consideration of its essence and structure, we must cast a look at that part which bore special reference to the art of dramatic representation; for the fate which Lessing's endeavors here experienced helped to determine the form in which the work now lies before us.

\* Klotz, *Deutsche Bibl.* VI. 151.

## CHAPTER III.

## LESSING AND THE ACTORS.

LESSING had, from early youth, associated frequently and gladly with actors ; but he had never hitherto appeared as a public judge of their performances. So much the more worthy of admiration was the prudence with which, now that his position made such an occupation his duty, he went to work at this extremely difficult undertaking. The criticism was to "accompany every step which the art of the poet, as well as of the actor, should make in the newly-founded theatre." This twofold task was all the more difficult because Lessing knew that the pieces to be represented, even though chosen with the best intentions, would, in the present condition of the German dramatic literature, offer, for the most part, very thankless tasks to the performers. Bad translations of numerous French plays rendered infinitely more difficult the labor of the actors, and these translations were nearly all bad, especially those in Berlin ; for which reason Lessing greatly preferred prose. But the German prose also of that time, even that of a translator like Madame Gottsched, who could certainly be regarded as one of the best, was miserable enough, and destroyed half the effect of good actors in good pieces. Lessing indicated very clearly this peril to his dramaturgical efficiency in the an-



nouncement, when he affirmed that the greatest skill of a dramatic critic consists in this — that in every case of pleasure or displeasure he knows how to discriminate infallibly as to the merits or demerits of both poet and actor. For to censure one for what the other has done amiss would be to ruin both. The former would lose courage, and the latter would be fortified in error. "Especially," he continues, "may the actor demand that, in this respect, the greatest strictness and impartiality shall be observed. The justification of the poet can be entered upon at any time; his work remains, and can always be at our command. But the art of the player is, in its nature, transitory. His good and bad acting passes by with equal rapidity; and, not unfrequently, the impression made upon the spectator is influenced by his own mood."

In the same announcement also he sets forth the highest aim of the histrionic artist; namely, to think everywhere *with* the poet, and, when necessary, to think *for* him. To the preservation of this supreme quality of the genuine actor, the attention of the dramaturgical critic should, therefore, be especially directed; and it is this point which Lessing kept closely before him, so long as his work included criticisms on the representations.

That "a beautiful figure, a bewitching mien, a speaking eye, a graceful walk, a musical voice, are charms which cannot be expressed in words," the author of the *Laokoön* knew only too well. Yet he also knew that while these "precious gifts of nature are of great advantage to the actor, they are yet far from being the only, or the greatest perfections of the player." And

here follows the delineation of the true actor, and of his essential vocation, in the famous words, "He must everywhere think with the poet; he must, also, wherever the poet is at fault, think for him." Lessing did not say too much when he added that one had reason to expect numerous instances of this excellence from the actors of the new stage. For they formed an association of artists such as Germany had never before seen. At their head stood the man to whom the history of the theatre has awarded the honorable name of father of the German scenic art, Conrad Eckhof, called by his contemporaries the German Roscius, and placed by the fine-minded Lichtenberg by the side of Garrick as his peer. This man, to whom Dame Nature had been a harsh step-mother in refusing him all outward attractions of form and feature, while he possessed great talents for the dramatic calling, had been obliged to rest his power almost wholly in the spiritual effect of the word upon the heart, the soul, and the judgment of the hearer, through the vehicle of a most wonderful voice; and now he stood at the head of his profession, in the full strength of his influence and efficiency. Both as an artist and as a man, he was entirely after Lessing's heart. As Lessing could not imagine a good dramatic author without moral worth and nobility of character, and therefore recommended his brother "to study ethics assiduously, and improve his own character," if he wished to produce anything worthy as a dramatic poet, so Eckhof's whole endeavor was directed to the moral elevation of his class. In the mind of this man the higher view of his vocation had, indeed, awakened, as Devrient says, a really religious

enthusiasm; and above all artistic progress in special directions, which the dramatic art owes to him, was the complete personality, the faithful industry, the constant striving after culture, the public spirit, in a word, the moral nobility of character to which he elevated himself, and which he sought to develop among his fellows, thereby opening the path of perfection to German scenic art.\* Lessing had met him ten years before, while on that unsuccessful journey to England, at Hamburg, where Eckhof was conducting Schöнемann's company as a sort of sub-principal, and was seeking to create a place for German original production by the side of the French, especially for Lessing's dramas, whose Miss Sara Sampson was first presented by him on that stage. Eckhof had founded in the same troupe an academy for the scientific study of the histrionic art; which, according to his conception, should begin, as it were, with the grammar, and gradually "enable the actors to understand themselves thoroughly, and to deserve the name of artist." This first attempt to bring the actors to an earnest and thorough study of their art had, indeed, been only of short duration; but it had, nevertheless, borne fruit — especially since Eckhof, even after the cessation of that academy, continued his investigation of general principles. Such a man suited Lessing exactly. Both were inspired by the same honest love of truth, the same zeal for the cultivation of simplicity and naturalness. The apprehension of his art which Eckhof embodied in the celebrated proposition, that the actor, in order to give reality to the creation of the poet, "must plunge after him into the sea of human

\* Devrient, II. 87.

thoughts and passions, and follow until he finds him," was wholly in Lessing's spirit.

All Lessing's plans for the improvement of the stage found their full realization in Eckhof, and in him alone ; through him the French style of representation, which had penetrated into Germany, was first set aside, and the true expression of Nature elevated into law.\* Thus, inseparable in spirit, stand forth Lessing and Eckhof, as the founders of the peculiarly German school of dramatic art.†

Let us now hear Lessing himself speak of this great artist. The very first word that he says concerning him points out the master, who towers far above all contemporaries in his profession. In the first representation upon the new stage, Eckhof had taken a very insignificant *rôle*. Whoever understands acting knows what this meant. His reward was the following verdict from Lessing : " This man may take any part he pleases ; one recognizes him as a first-rate actor, even in the most unimportant place, and laments that he cannot personate all the characters." Lessing praises especially Eckhof's masterly delivery of general reflections ; and the remarks made in this connection, as well as the nice distinction drawn between original and copied emotion in the actor, are still in force and valid. Indeed, the first numbers of the *Dramaturgy* are rich in such hints ; and it is plain that Lessing was in earnest also with this part of his task. He speaks of the " gestures which accompany delivery, and which, as natural signs of things, help to impart truth and life to the conventional signs of speech ;" and here, too, he refers

\* Vischer, *Æsthetik*, III. p. 1453.

† Devrient, II. 124-179.

to the ancients. He compares their "always significant" movements of arms and hands with the meaningless monotony of modern gesticulation; which caricature of antique grace, as Lessing sketches it, is still to be seen on many great stages. He unfolds the importance of individualizing attitudes; and promises, on some subsequent occasion, to elucidate by examples the gradation of significant to picturesque gestures, their difference, and their use. At the conclusion of this dramaturgical digression on delivery, he acknowledges that everything instructive in it is due entirely to Eckhof's example.

"I have endeavored only to make correct deductions from his practices. How easy, how pleasant, it is to investigate after an artist who not only succeeds in excellence, but also creates it!" With equal admiration he speaks of this great artist wherever his name occurs. Even the scenes wherein the poet has failed give him an opportunity to evince his art. The delicacy of his transition from haughtiness to tenderness, from tenderness to exasperation, in the rôle of Orosmane in Voltaire's *Zaïre*, elicits from Lessing the exclamation, "All that Rémond de Sainte Albine would wish to see realized in his actor, is accomplished by Herr Eckhof in so perfect a manner that one might believe him to be the ideal of the art-critic." With enthusiastic expressions he celebrates the perfect comprehension of the chief rôle of Gresset's Sidney, which he considers one of Eckhof's strongest characters; and the representation of another part in a long since forgotten piece by Madame Graffigny forces him to exclaim, "*Tot linguæ quot membra viro!*" \*

\* The man has as many tongues as limbs.

We cannot here stop to discuss the difference of opinion which induced Lessing's great rival, Schröder, afterwards to moderate, in some respects, the praise thus awarded to Eckhof.\* It is certain that the greatest actor of his time was worthy of the greatest German dramaturgist; and Gotter spoke the truth when, after Eckhof's death (1778), he called out over his grave to German actors, —

“Proteus in form and sorcerer in tone,  
He banished folly from the tragic throne,  
And reinstated truth.  
He raised your art, and artist's dignity,  
And stands before you, oracle and guide!”

But if Lessing made especially prominent the merits of this great master, he did not therefore forget to accord to other actors their due credit. His general law for the representations was, that one must be content with a piece, if, among the whole number of persons, a few have played excellently, and the remainder well.

He followed this principle on all occasions. He mentioned the scenes and the acting only when he could praise them. When, in the epilogue, composed by Loewen, for the opening of the theatre, a few lines excited discontent because it was said therein to the spectators, —

“Remember that with us the art but just begins,  
In which, for a single Garrick, we have a thousand Quins,”

he made haste to obviate any misunderstanding of this passage by an explanation which should pacify the displeased actors. And thus we see him everywhere zeal-

\* Schröder's *Leben von Meyer*, I. 129, 143.

ously engaged in keeping this excessively irritable and sensitive genus, upon whom the success of the enterprise so greatly depended, in good humor. He treated the more important with regard, the weaker ones with encouraging forbearance. Whilst he duly distinguished an Eckhof, he did not forget the good performers of minor servant characters and secondary parts ; and Merschy, and Felbrich, and the rest of their stamp, not less than the more important actresses Hensel and Loewen, owe to him an unexpected immortality for their names. It is impossible to excel the delicacy of Lessing's dramaturgical remarks on the playing of Madame Hensel (the most important actress of the theatre, because she controlled the chief stockholder, Seyler), in the absurd rôle of Clorinda in Cronegk's *Olinthus and Sophronia*. One must know from experience how difficult it is to criticise in such a case, in order to appreciate fully Lessing's skill in administering censure without arousing ill feeling, and his success in giving a coloring of praise even to a direct disapproval of the playing, while he endeavors, at the same time, to allege as excuse the current traditional manner of the stage. He sought also to elevate the social position of the class and profession by an emphatic declaration, that "the actor's talent is as honorable as any other, and the public exercise of it not in the least a disgrace."

But in spite of all these efforts, Lessing was destined to the bitter experience that his prudence, mildness, and forbearance were all in vain. Even before the appearance of the *Dramaturgy*, one of the most talented actresses, Madame Mécour, who was highly praised by

Gotter, and much esteemed also by Lessing, had made it a condition that she was not to be mentioned, either for good or for bad, in Lessing's criticisms; and he had willingly accorded this condition to the foolish woman, who, by this caprice, deprived herself of the most enviable testimony to her great talent.

But he had continued his Dramaturgy scarcely beyond the first four weeks, when, with the twenty-fifth article, he broke off, once for all, his criticism of the representations and of the actors.

The despicable vanity of the comedians which caused this change, remains, as Devrient says, an indelible stain upon the histrionic class. In the twentieth piece, a critique of *Cénie*,\* Lessing had said of the actress in the principal part, "*Cénie* is Madame Hensel. No word from her mouth falls to the ground. What she says she has not learned; it comes from her own head, from her own heart. Whether she speak or not, her playing continues uninterruptedly. I can detect only a single fault; but it is a very rare fault, a very enviable fault: the actress is too great for this *rôle*. It is like a giant practising with the weapons of a stripling. I should not wish to excel in everything that I attempted." In vain did Lessing clothe in the finest praise this mild censure of a mania for *rôles*, unfortunately so frequent among distinguished actors. In vain had he, on other occasions, characterized this *artiste* as one of the greatest actresses which the German theatre had ever possessed. The insulted lady broke off her friendship with him, and, by means of

\* A play translated by Madame Gottsched, from the French of Madame Graffigny. — TRANS.



intrigues and various annoyances, caused him to give up entirely this part of his dramaturgical criticism.

His feeling on the subject is recognizable in the words with which, a few days afterwards, he concluded his last article of this kind, and which, doubtless, referred to that event: "There is but one compliment which I can pay to an artist, whether of my own or of the other sex; and it is this — that I assume him to be entirely free from all vain sensitiveness; and that with him the love of art is the ruling motive; that he is glad to be criticised freely and publicly, and would rather be occasionally misunderstood than less frequently judged. Whosoever does not appreciate this plain dealing I consider unworthy of being studied. The true virtuoso does not believe that we see and feel his perfections, let us applaud as loudly as we will, unless he observe that we also recognize his defects. He laughs in his sleeve at all unbounded admiration, and is really pleased only with the praise of him who is able also to censure." This dissatisfaction is still more strongly expressed at the close of the *Dramaturgy*. Here he explains the twofold cause why histrionic criticism so soon became irksome to him. First of all it was the want of a real theory of histrionic art. "We have actors, but no art of acting. If such an art ever existed in the olden time, we have lost it; it must be created anew. There is enough babble on the subject in various languages; but of special rules, universally recognized, and framed with perspicuity and precision, in accordance with which the blame or praise of an actor can be determined in a particular case, I know of but two or three. Hence it is that all reasoning on the subject always appears so vacillating and ambiguous

that it is really no wonder if the actor, knowing nothing beyond a happy routine, feels himself insulted by criticism. He is apt to think himself never sufficiently praised, but always excessively blamed; and, more frequently, does not even know whether the language expresses praise or blame. Indeed, it was long ago discovered that the sensitiveness of artists with regard to criticism increases just in proportion as the number, clearness, and certainty of the principles of their art decrease." It is characteristic of Lessing that, in these remarks, he sought to excuse not himself only, but also the actors; and several years afterwards he zealously defended against her enemies this very *artiste* whose vanity and intrigues had so utterly disgusted him with his task. From that time he disliked all specifically dramaturgical activity; and after the twenty-fifth article he refers only once to the histrionic art, in order to praise the actors of the ancients, who made a very earnest study of their business; on which occasion he adds the finest remarks on the plot in "The Brothers" of Terence, and, at the same time, shows that, even in the fourth century after Christ, the old Roman grammarians, such as Donatus, comprehended these dramaturgical niceties very well. When one surveys the fulness and profundity of the observations made by Lessing during the few weeks of his occupation, it cannot be sufficiently regretted that this rich mine was scarcely discovered when it closed again forever, with all its treasures, before the conceited sensitiveness of the green-room. For the first time German histrionic art had been directed to those fundamental laws which Shakespeare puts into the mouth of Hamlet, instructing the players, and which, as Lessing says, "are

golden rules for all actors who care at all for rational commendation." What he observes, in this connection, concerning Shakespeare's relation to the histrionic art, that "he, perhaps, meditated all the more profoundly on this art because he had so much less genius for it," goes, likewise, to the very heart of the matter; whilst, at the same time, it expresses Lessing's own feeling. We have already seen that from his early years of student-life Lessing had busied himself very earnestly with the study of histrionics; that he had translated, in abridgment, the work of Rémond de Sainte Albine on this subject; and, on this occasion, had promised an original treatise "On Corporal Eloquence;" and that there was a period of his life when he was not disinclined to make trial himself as an actor. The kernel of his theory lies in the famous words which he once wrote in an actor's album: —

"Be one in tragedy, O art and nature,  
For, interchanged, ye show truth's every feature!"

He has an excellent chapter of remarks on the "fire" of the actor, which might even nowadays be read by a manager to his company with profit. The place which he here assigns to the histrionic art, as intermediate between the formative arts and poetry, recalls his Laokoön, of which his mind was full when he began this new occupation. Equally valuable are his observations on "movement in declamation;" his warnings against crude realism in pantomime; his direction to profit by the imagination of the spectator; his insisting upon rapid acting, especially in light, burlesque comedy. And when, in stating the importance of suitable material for the dramatic, especially for the tragic, poet, he adds, that even the

weakest and most confused pieces are, in their way, successful, if only the poet has given a happy touch to the material, he does not forget another fact, that, strangely enough, it is always in such pieces that good actors show themselves to the best advantage. "Seldom is a masterpiece presented in so excellent a manner as it is written; the mediocre always fares the best; perhaps because in an ordinary piece an actor can supply original force; perhaps because what is mediocre leaves us more time and repose to attend to the acting; perhaps because in such a case all depends upon one or two prominent persons, whilst in a more perfect play each person must be a capital performer, and if he is not so, and bungles his *rôle*, he thus helps to spoil the rest." But the profoundest thought that has ever been uttered concerning the histrionic art, is found in Lessing's discussions on the reciprocal action and harmony between body and soul in expression and gesture, and on the important principle that the player's art must operate from without inward, and not from within outward — discussions suggested by Eckhof's acting, and which, since then, have not been further pursued by any one.\* How earnestly Lessing was disposed to fulfil his task as regards the representations, is evident from the particular attention that he devoted to the orchestra, "which, in our drama, takes, to a certain extent, the place of the ancient choruses." We owe to this zeal the fine chapter on the music between the acts, which those could hardly read without blushing — only they do not read it at all — who nowadays, from the most pitiful pecuniary consideration, have committed the barbarism of utterly abolishing this

\* Guhrauer, II. 153.

music in the first theatre of the intellectual capital of Germany !

Thus much concerning the specifically theatrical part of Lessing's *Dramaturgy*.

Of the complaints which the actors, on their part, raised against Lessing, there is still an echo preserved in the *Biography of Schröder*, whose author relates that Lessing was never known to give his constant attention to an entire representation. "He went to and fro, talked with acquaintances, or pursued his own thoughts, and, out of the features awakened by his transient enjoyment, composed a picture that belonged to his own soul rather than to reality." It is easy to admit the truth of this description. How could a Lessing endure silent observation of these representations, which, so often, both in form and substance, must have been a martyrdom to him ! But one must also admit, with Devrient, that, in spite of apparent carelessness, Lessing saw more at one glance than others would have seen in hours of close attention ; and that his brief remarks possessed a fulness of meaning which made the longest treatises superfluous. It was also a source of displeasure that he paid no heed to the loudest applause ; which he deemed a disturbance and desecration of the illusion ; and that he, therefore, never gave the signal for such applause, nor encouraged it by his own participation.

. Whoever is acquainted with actors knows how such conduct on the part of the official critic of their productions would be considered by them. But Lessing's aversion to all such fosterings of vanity was so deep and entire that he regarded it as unworthy even of Voltaire "to allow himself to be called out and gazed at like a mar-

mot, and clapped" by the public. In conclusion, there was sufficient cause for disgust with his position in the meanness of the German journalistic gossip, which was called into life by the "Library of Belles-Lettres," founded about this time by the before-mentioned Halle Professor Klotz, and which became the prolific mother of all subsequent gossiping German newspapers. This journal, with whose Corypheus we shall become more intimately acquainted hereafter, professed to be able to reveal by what secret personal motives the dramaturgist of the new theatre was influenced in attributing to one actress a sonorous voice, and in praising so highly the *début* of another.\*

Lessing might indeed joke about all this ; but his manner in doing so proves, nevertheless, that these vulgarities, which, as ever, found eager credence in the great mass of the public, disgusted him. In reference to these matters he once, in the Dramaturgy, ironically pities his readers on account of the deception which he has prepared for them in his paper ; thus breaking out at the close of a long treatise on Voltaire's *Merope* : —

"But still, and always, *Merope* ! I really pity my readers who have been promising themselves a theatrical newspaper, as varied and variegated, as entertaining and droll, as only a theatrical newspaper can be ! Instead of a succession of short, merry, or pathetic romances ; instead of incidental sketches of such strange, foolish crea-

\* Klotz, *Deutsche Bibliothek*, III. 59, and IV. 171, where the impudent disciple of Klotz justifies his reference to such scandalous gossip with the words, "*The rumor may be true or false. I must notice it, in order to explain, in some degree at least, the extravagant praise of these actresses.*" This one extract is sufficient to characterize the spirit and tone of the Klotz clique and its organ.

as those indeed must be who devote themselves to comedy-writing rather than to narrate pleasant, and per- somewhat scandalous, anecdotes of actors, and specially of actresses; instead of all these fine things which they expected, they receive long, earnest, dry criticisms of old and familiar pieces; dull investigations as to what should and should not be allowed in a tragedy; and amongst other tedious things, even interpretations of Aristotle! And they are to read all this! As I have said, I pity them; they have been terribly humiliated! Yet, in confidence, it is better that they should than I. And I should be very sorry if I were allowed to make their expectations a law for my province. Not that these would be very hard to fulfil. Indeed! I should, on the contrary, find them very convenient, if they would only accord better with my wishes."

But it is time to examine more closely the Dramaturgy, as regards its essential contents.

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THE Drama "a system which owed to accidental incidents in poetry, because of thought, contained in all its utterances."

There are three substances of the criticism of literature; the review of the evolution of the form of dramatic,

As regards the first, he expressed his judgment in his announcement. He thought the German stage could not be rather a degenerate one, and of this assertion he was convinced. German poets and actors of joining in the same way, done, and praising German literature as it went out the wrong path.

## CHAPTER IV.

## THE DRAMATURGY AND THE GERMAN DRAMA.

THE Dramaturgy was, even far less than the *Laokoön*, "a systematic book." But these fugitive leaves, which owed their existence and contents to the most accidental incitement, became a philosophy of dramatic poetry, because they proceeded from a mind whose form of thought, controlled by a pervading principle, showed in all its utterances the radii of a sun-bright centre.

There are three principal points of view under which the substance of Lessing's *Dramaturgy* may be brought : the criticism of contemporary German dramatic literature ; the review of its prototype, the French ; and the evolution of the conception of tragedy, as the highest form of dramatic, and, indeed, of all poetry.

As regards the first point, Lessing had already expressed his judgment with sufficient clearness in the announcement. He owed it to himself to show that the German stage could scarcely be called a nascent, but rather a degenerated one ; and he furnished such proof of this assertion as brought tears to the eyes of the German poets and their admirers of that time. Instead of joining in the customary eulogy of what they had done, and praising the progress of dramatic poetry in German literature during the last decades, he pointed out the wrong paths into which it had strayed, and the



steps which it must retrace in order to reach again the right way. His aim was to tell his nation the truth, the whole, unvarnished truth; that he might bring it to a knowledge of its real strength, and arouse it from that dream of idle self-inspection to which it has always shown an excessive tendency. That in this endeavor the critic's own friends were not to be spared, was, to Lessing, a matter of course.

So much, indeed, did he have at heart the advancement of his nation, that he went one step farther, and brought, as an offering to this end, his own fame as a poet. In the very first article of the *Dramaturgy* the German public had been obliged to hear that Cronegk's *Olinthus* and *Sophronia*, with which the stage opened, and which was a much-admired tragedy by a deceased poet, was nothing but a feeble imitation; that it did not deserve the honor of consecrating the new German National Theatre; and that "if a better play could have been found," the managers would deserve censure for having produced this piece. This criticism, though well sustained by Lessing's arguments, created general dissatisfaction. If these things were done in the green tree, what would be done in the dry? Cronegk's tragedies, together with Brawe's, Weisse's, and Lessing's own dramas, stood, at this time, in the first rank; and, nine years before, a prize had been awarded to Cronegk's *Codrus* by Lessing's own friends. Lessing affected to be much surprised at the reception given to his first essay; but the humorous manner in which he expressed his astonishment showed clearly enough that the feeling was assumed. "I was much astonished," he wrote in the seventh section of the *Dramaturgy*, "to learn that I

had displeased several of my readers by my outspoken judgment. If they allow themselves to be offended with modest freedom, entirely exempt from secondary motives, I run the risk of displeasing them very often in the future." It did not occur to him to be frightened from his task by this general disapprobation; and this task was, first of all, to show that his cutting words in reference to the crowning of Cronegk's Codrus by the publishers of the Universal German Library, "if cripples run a race, the one who first reaches the goal is none the less a cripple," were applicable to the entire dramatic literature of Germany.

The Dramaturgy embraces, as is well known, only the representations of the first three months. In this brief period not less than fifty-one pieces were brought forward, and of these only nineteen were repeated; and of these nineteen only one was repeated three times; which state of things, by the by, presupposes extraordinary exertions on the part of the actors. Of these fifty-one pieces, only sixteen were by German authors; all the rest by French; and among the German, besides Lessing, the long-since-forgotten Cronegk, Elias Schlegel, and Weisse were obliged to represent stars of the first magnitude! The German translations of French plays were almost uniformly miserable; and what Lessing calls the German coloring, the native appearance, was wanting to comedy, not only to these translations, but also to the original German productions. Even the best piece of the best German comedian of that time, Elias Schlegel's "Triumph of Good Women," suffered from the cardinal error that the characters were not essentially German. "In our comedies, however," adds Lessing, "we are so

much accustomed to foreign, and especially to French, manners, that this fault would scarcely be noticed."

Although he expressed himself with great forbearance concerning the original comedies, and the productions of their principal authors, Weisse, Gellert, Hippel, Krüger, Heufeld, Romanus, in order not to discourage the poets too much, nor give too great offence to the public, it was still evident how low he ranked their efforts, in comparison with the true standard of comedy. In tragedy, his criticism of Weisse, the then German Shakespeare, completely overthrew their arrogant pretensions. After the early death of Cronegk, Schlegel, and Brawe, Weisse had come forward as tragic poet, and, as it were, their heir. At the time when Lessing began his *Dramaturgy*, Weisse had already, as he once said in a letter to Garve, "*scrawled* five volumes full of tragedies and comedies." Among the former were his "Edward III.," and "Richard III.;" his "Calas," his "Romeo and Juliet;" in which last tragedy he boasted that he had essentially improved and purified the Shakespearian poem. All these were favorite pieces of the German theatre-going public. How must Weisse's joints have trembled when his old university friend Lessing took in hand, though with all courtesy, his much-admired Richard III., and freely exposed its affectation and emptiness! To be sure, Weisse, declared to his "first and oldest friend," by letter, that he was not so childish as to be angry at the criticism of his "theatrical farces and trifles;" but he gave vent to his real feelings in a simultaneous letter to Garve,\* in which he condemned Lessing's critique as unjust in the highest degree, reproached him with want

\* In Gubrauer, II. 213.

of regard to theatrical effect, and called his dissections "closet criticism;" which could, by cool, unimpassioned reading, subtilize away even the best piece, but was incapable of any productive effect. "I remember with trembling that I have *scrawled* (!) five volumes of tragedies and comedies! Had Lessing brandished his scourge at my first attempt, I should never have had a line printed; and since he pulls down everything, nearly all courage for further effort has oozed out of me." And even as this type of a Saxon Philistine dreaded the approach of the great German literary reformer, who seemed to him a subverter, disposed to "tear down everything," so did all his brethren in Apollo feel that their existence, as dramatic poets, was threatened.

On Weisse himself, Lessing's criticism had, meanwhile, produced the wholesome effect, that from that time he "*scrawled*" no more tragedies, but withdrew to the more innocent province of opera texts and children's books. It was in vain that Klotz and his followers praised him in their journal as one of the first of dramatic poets, styled him a genius, and his Romeo a splendid tragedy, and returned, again and again, to discuss, in an irritating manner, the injustice practised upon him by Lessing.\* The Leipsic tax-collector composed no more tragedies, although, in a certain circle, he was, for a long time, regarded as a great dramatic poet; and more than a generation afterwards, Iffland placed a laurel crown upon his head.†

The manner in which the literary clique of Klotz endeavored to take the German dramatists under their protection, as ill-used men of talent, in opposition to

\* Deutsche Bibliothek, I. 4. 1-9; III. 51, 163, 616; IV. 105, 498.

† Danzel's Gottsched, 269.

the Hamburg Dramaturgist, whose critique only forged "fetters" for genius, while it was "of no practical use" to the theatre, and whose sophistry and love of paradox, whose imperious pride and arrogant conceit, forgot that the stage was to be helped, not by rules, but by examples, — all this can be read in detail in Klotz's Library.\* Nevertheless, Lessing pursued his course without being hindered by these malicious babblers. It seemed too much to step aside even to trample them under his feet. He allowed the use of bad German plays, in order, as he said in the announcement, to teach his public to exercise upon them their critical power. And whilst he set up, theoretically, a worthy standard, towards which the German drama was to strive, in order to rise above its present condition of childish immaturity, he indicated the causes which hindered this development. "The best," he says, "that we Germans have, as yet, produced in *belles-lettres*, consists in a few essays by young men. Nay, with us, pedantic prejudice is so universal, that we consider young men as the only proper laborers in this field. Men, it is said, have more serious studies, or more important employment, in state and church. Verses and comedies are toys; at best, only preliminary exercises with which one ought not to be occupied after his twenty-fifth year. So soon as we approach the period of manhood, we should devote all our powers to some useful office; and if any leisure remains for writing, we should choose only such subjects as befit the gravity and importance of men; such as a fine compendium of law or philosophy; an erudite chronicle of our native town, or of some imperial city; an

\* Klotz, Deutsche Bibliothek, IV. 152.

edifying sermon. This solemn pedantry being, and having long been, so prevalent amongst us, we need not be surprised that our elegant literature is so inferior, not merely to the literature of the ancients, but also to that of all modern cultivated people. Say what we will in its favor, it has a puerile cast, which I fear it will long retain. Blood and life, color and fire, we have, in some measure, at last; but pith and nerve, marrow and bone, are sadly deficient. Thence it comes that our polite literature offers so few works which a thoughtful man would wish to take up for his refreshment and invigoration, when desirous to escape from the wearisome circle of daily occupations! What nourishment could such a man find, for example, in our excessively trivial comedies?" In the same strain, Lessing alludes to the career of a then celebrated French dramatic poet, Du Belloy; who, as a young man, threw aside the study of law out of love for the theatre, became a comedian, and, for some time, wandered about with a travelling troupe in Germany, where he wrote a few plays, then returned to his own country, "and very soon became more happy and famous through the success of his tragedies than jurisprudence alone could ever have made him." "Woe to the young German genius," exclaims Lessing, "who should take such a course. Contempt and beggary would be his certain lot!"

He had reason to speak thus. At this very time, on account of his unsettled mode of life, he was characterized in Klotz's *Journal* as a sort of vagabondizing literate, who "has roamed about more than scholars general are wont to do!"\* This coarse German Philistinism,

\* Deutsche Allg. Bibliothek, III. 97.

which, in self-complacent imitation of the civilized Roman barbarians, regarded poetry and art as "farces" and "trifles" (*nugæ*), even while it practised them, and spoke of the composition of a tragedy with the ignorance of a boot-black, reached its height in the author of the German Romeo and Juliet, and Richard III., in the Leipsic tax-gatherer Weisse. This style of mind was utterly deficient in earnest and worthy conceptions of art, and in realizing its high mission, and consequently in diligence and effort for fathoming its nature and conditions, and for attaining its purposes. And as Goethe once said of himself to his nation, —

"To me, as to great Luther, may you raise,  
For my good deeds, a monument of praise :  
He freed you from the Priests' intralling hands,  
And I have broken the Philistines' bands," —

so may Lessing be esteemed as a forerunner of this enfranchisement from the Philistine nets which then ensnared art and poetry in Germany. But he did more than this. He was not satisfied to prove that his nation had not, as yet, any poetic literature, not even in the drama. He went still farther, and silenced those of his adversaries who would have criticised his own productions with the celebrated declaration that he was not a poet. "I am neither actor nor poet;" he says in this much discussed confession, with which he, so characteristically, concluded his *Dramaturgy*. "I am, indeed, frequently complimented with the latter honorable title, but only because I am not understood. The few dramatic essays that I have ventured upon do not justify this heedless generosity. Not every man who takes a pencil in his hand and mixes colors is a painter.

The oldest of these essays of mine belong to a period of life when desire and dexterity are easily mistaken for genius. If there be anything tolerable in those of a later date, I am conscious that I owe it all to criticism. I do not feel in myself that living fountain which lifts itself by its own strength, and by its own force sports and spreads in radiations so rich, so fresh, so pure! With me it is all squeezing and pumping! I should be altogether poor, and cold, and shortsighted, did I not know how to borrow occasionally, with discretion, from foreign treasures, to warm myself at another man's fire, and to strengthen my sight with the optic glasses of art. I have, therefore, always been ashamed and angry when I have read, or heard, anything derogatory to criticism. Criticism, it is said, stifles genius; whereas I flatter myself to have received from it something that comes very near genius. I am a lame man, who cannot be particularly edified by a lampoon against crutches. Indeed, criticism is like the crutch, which helps the cripple move from place to place, but can never make a racer of him. If, through criticism, I have produced something better than a man of my talents could have produced without its aid, still it costs me so much time, I must be so entirely free from other pursuits, must be uninterrupted by involuntary distractions, must be able at every step to run through all the observations that I have ever made of manners and passions, that no one in the world could be more unsuited than I to be a laborer, whose task it should be to supply a theatre with novelties."

What was the object of this wonderful declaration, with which the man who, at that moment, stood as the



first dramatic writer of his nation, disclaimed the title of poet? If a figure of speech be allowable here, we might answer this question by a comparison with the general who, at a decisive moment, in order to inflame still more the courage of his troops, throws the banner, which he has upheld, into the enemy's trenches.

In the Dramaturgy, Lessing had exposed the emptiness of the German dramatic literature of his time. He had shown how far it was from its goal; yea, how far even from the right way to that goal. He had broken in pieces the false gods which it worshipped, and had pointed to the only poet of modern times who was worthy of their adoration, — to Shakespeare, — who must be studied, not plundered, and whose dramatic genius, in order to benefit the German nation, "must be for us what the camera obscura is for the landscape painter; a means of learning how Nature, in all cases, projects itself upon a plain surface." Convinced that improvement and progress could come only from a full realization of the miserableness of present circumstances, he had exposed with unsparing hand the want of earnestness, diligence, and study, the self-satisfied negligence and wanton frivolity of German dramatic production, in which a fellow like Weisse allowed himself to write a *Richard III.*, without taking pains even to become acquainted with Shakespeare's *Richard*, and to work over *Romeo and Juliet* into a sensation play in prose! What a man of talent might produce if he should go to work earnestly, how nearly he could approximate genius in his productions by accepting all the helps which study and reflection (called by Lessing "criticism") offer to his endeavor, he thought he had

sufficiently proved by his own example. This was all he claimed for himself. So much the more right, therefore, had he to insist that others should labor with the same artistic diligence, the same thorough earnestness, the same conscientiousness, that he had shown. By rejecting for himself the victor's prize, the laurel crown of the poet, he pointed to a future of genius for which he was preparing the way; and the history of German literature shows that his confidence was not in vain. It is useless to defend Lessing against himself, when the purpose for which he made the declaration is so evident. The most skilful hand must fail, which should essay to present a more striking picture of Lessing, the poet, than he himself has done in this confession. Its modesty causes its proud and clearly expressed self-consciousness to be easily overlooked. If the author of *Minna von Barnhelm* knew that through the advantages of critical reflection he had produced, in the way of poetic creation, "something very nearly akin to genius," he certainly would not be disposed to disclaim all poetic endowment, and deny his vocation as a dramatic poet. This is obvious in itself, even if we were not in possession of his own testimony to the fact that, in freer and happier moments than those were in which he concluded his *Dramaturgy*, he expressly assigned to himself this gift and this vocation. But in referring to the ancients and to Shakespeare, he might well desire that the full honor of the poet's name should be reserved for that genius in whom original creative power was in perfect harmony with the activity of the reflective understanding; combining to present the perfect artistic genius, which, as he says in another place, "at the

same time, a born critic, contains in itself the test of all theories, and comprehends, retains, and follows only those rules which are the echo of its own sentiments." That he himself was not this perfect poetic genius, he felt all the more deeply as he became able to trace the process of his own creativeness. And he uttered this conviction with that proud candor which realized that it lost nothing by disclaiming what it did not possess ; and that the higher the standard was elevated through his self-renunciation, the firmer and loftier was his own position before his countrymen. The prophetic confidence shown in this noble resignation, his strong faith in the genius of the German people, have found their fulfilment in Schiller and Goethe ; or rather, in the highest degree, in Goethe alone. For Schiller too, who recognizes the fulness and perfection of Goethe's genius, utters almost the same complaint with Lessing, when he says of himself that theory and criticism have robbed him of his ardor, and hindered the creative process in his mind. In a letter to Goethe,\* which belongs to the latest period of his life, he confesses also that "his play of inspiration and his power of imagination act with less freedom, since they are conscious of the presence of witnesses."

But as no one would think of refusing to Schiller the name of poet, so neither will the modesty of the author of *Minna*, *Emilia Galotti*, and *Nathan*, prevent German posterity from counting these works among the pearls of its national literature, and their creator among the poets, who, standing on the next step to perfection, rank worthily among the geniuses of the second class. Lessing proves, by this confession, that he belongs to

\* Briefe, 784.

that small number of men who are more just towards all others than to themselves. As far as his poetic organization is concerned, it is true that there is lacking that passionate earnestness of feeling, which, too often, springs from obscure, or momentarily saddened, thought; and in the expression of such passion, therefore, he succeeds only so far as reflection and correct observation of human nature assist him. He himself possessed only that degree of warmth of feeling which is consistent with perfect clearness of thought.

He had nothing of the qualities of the poet, who, in the words of the ancient rhetorician Longinus, "sober in intoxication, unites the self-forgetfulness of Bacchus with the thoughtfulness of Minerva." This "Bacchanal self-forgetfulness" was impossible to his rare perspicuity; and on that very account he is deficient in the specific element of the *lyric* poet — a deficiency which was connected with his well-known indifference to nature and landscape, and his want of taste for music. The images of his poetry lie in a sun-like clearness, to which the mysterious charm of shades and *chiaro-scuro*, the picturesque in conjunction with the plastic element, is entirely wanting. But the nobility and purity, the vigor and clearness of sentiment and feeling, the forms and characters created by the dramatist, offer a rich compensation for this lack, and secure to his mature productions an imperishable influence over the minds of men. And thus we may close these considerations with the beautiful words which the aged Goethe uttered to Eckermann,\* "Lessing wished to disclaim the title of poet, but his immortal works testify against himself!"

\* Gespräche mit Goethe, III. 229.

## CHAPTER V.

## THE DRAMATURGY AND THE FRENCH DRAMA.

**I**F Lessing, with strictest justice, brought before his countrymen the true condition of their dramatic literature, it gave him so much the greater satisfaction to furnish them, at the same time, with proof that the models to which they had for half a century looked up with veneration were not less remote from the ideal standard; and that, if tragedy be accepted as the highest form of dramatic poetry, "the French have, as yet, no theatre." The first French poet, whose works he employed in demonstration of this proposition, was Voltaire, so deified by his age, by his people, and by all cultivated Europe. We have seen that Lessing had learned enough, by his own observation and experience, of Voltaire's personal character to thoroughly despise him as a man. This contempt sharpened the sting of the critique, since Lessing regarded it as an impossibility that a truly great dramatic poet should be devoid of moral nobility.

The very first mention of the celebrated author in the Dramaturgy is a sarcasm on the wanton frivolity "with which the wise old age of the divine Voltaire" delighted the youthful world by "instructive tales" after the style of the new Agnes. Then follows immediately the criticism of Semiramis. With annihilating irony he first of

all scourges the arrogance of the French poet towards the ancients, and the silliness of his reverential German adorers and imitators. "What avails it," he exclaims, "to take exceptions in any respect to Monsieur de Voltaire? He speaks, and is believed." Contempt of the man crops out everywhere in the criticism of the author and poet. It is with truly terrible bitterness that Lessing exclaims, in reference to a passage in a letter written by the author of *Zaïre* to the English translator of his work, "There are *only* three falsehoods in this passage, and that is really not many for Monsieur de Voltaire!" This cutting tone everywhere pervades the Dramaturgy in speaking of him. His weakness in wishing to be regarded as an historian; his superficial knowledge of antiquity; his childish vanity; his sophistical, unjust, and deceitful treatment of other dramatists; the gross lies, the malicious misrepresentation, the whole shameless perfidy towards the Italian poet Maffei, from whom he had stolen in his *Merope* from beginning to end, — are all exposed with unsparing severity.

One can see, too, that Lessing's sentiment of nationality, so deeply injured by arrogant Frenchmen, receives a certain satisfaction in this thorough criticism of the greatest and most celebrated writer of proud France. His verdict is condensed into these words: "There is always something to be learned from even the most insignificant remarks of Voltaire; if not always from what he says, at least from what he ought to have said." "*Primus sapientiæ gradus est falsa intelligere*," \* he exclaims; "and I am acquainted with no author who could better enable us to take this first step, or furnish

\* The first step to wisdom is to know what is false.

us more means of determining whether we stand upon it, than Monsieur de Voltaire, and therefore none who could give us less help in ascending to the second step, which is to know the true — *secundus vera cognoscere*.”

The whole criticism of Voltaire in the *Dramaturgy* is developed according to this proposition; and many very important results for the philosophy of the dramatic art are the fruits of its deductions. Lessing himself acknowledges this when, in immediate connection with the passage last cited, he says of his method, that it is the old Aristotelian manner; which first, and before all things, seeks out some one with whom the critic can contend; then the subject-matter is gradually interwoven, and the rest follows of itself. “To this end — I confess it honestly — I have in this work chosen French authors chiefly, and among them especially Monsieur de Voltaire.” The series was opened with a criticism of *Semiramis*. Not in vain had Voltaire lived three years in England. He had become acquainted with Shakespeare on his native soil, and was eager to assimilate from his plays certain sources of effect. He was the first to follow the example of Hamlet in bringing an apparition upon the stage. Lessing discusses the theory of belief in ghosts (already treated with such complacent superficiality by Voltaire) by transferring the subject from historical reality to the realm of poetry. He shows the significance, the poetic illusion, the dignity, of Shakespeare’s conception in comparison with the ridiculous dead machinery of Voltaire’s apparitions. As an apology for his spectre, the French poet had appealed to the historical fact of a belief in ghosts. Lessing therefore takes this occasion to point out the

relation of historical truth to dramatic poetry ; in which the former is not end, but means.

Voltaire had vaunted the moral tendency of his piece ; which taught that the Highest Power makes exceptions to its eternal laws in order to bring concealed crime to light. Lessing does not forget to impress upon the "philosopher of Ferney" that this morality, on the whole, edifies very little ; and it would, unquestionably, be far more becoming the wisest Being to be able to dispense with such extraordinary means ; and better for us to believe that the reward of the good and the punishment of the wicked are woven by this Being into the ordinary chain of events. Above all, he made use of Voltaire's declaration to establish the immensely significant proposition, that poetry in its essential nature has nothing to do with such direct morality. "I will not say," he exclaims, "that it is a mistake for the dramatic poet to so arrange his plot that it may serve for the elucidation or confirmation of some great moral truth. But I will say that such an arrangement of the plot is not necessary ; that there can be very instructive pieces which have no such isolated maxims in view ; that it is a mistake to regard the moral saying found at the close of some ancient tragedies as the motive of the whole play." Is not this a remark which is applicable, under some circumstances, even in these days ? as, for instance, when one reads the celebrated commentary on Shakespeare by Gervinus. Lessing has repeatedly laid such deep stress upon the relation of morality to poetry, that it is hardly excusable for any one still to accuse him of a one-sided moral stand-point in poetry.

After *Semiramis* it is *Zaïre*, Voltaire's best and most



celebrated tragedy, that Lessing subjects to his criticism. Here too Voltaire had attempted again to borrow from Shakespeare; for his jealous Orosmane is modelled after Othello. But "out of the flaming pyre of Shakespearian verse the French poet has been able to snatch only a single brand, and even that one smokes and reeks more than it lights and warms." \* A flattering French critic had boasted that love itself had dictated Voltaire's *Zaïre*. "It would have been more correct," comments Lessing, "to have said *gallantry*." And here follows that inspired utterance concerning Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet, which, in its grand simplicity, outweighs all the commentaries in the world.

"I know of only one tragedy which love itself helped to create, and that is the Romeo and Juliet of Shakespeare. It is true, Voltaire makes his enamoured *Zaïre* express her emotions in a very graceful and delicate manner; but what is this expression compared with that living picture of all the tenderest, most secret wiles by which love insinuates itself into our soul; of all the imperceptible advantages which it wins; of all the artifices which it employs to bring every other passion under its control, until it becomes the sole tyrant of all our desires and aversions! Voltaire understands remarkably well the chancery style of love, if I may so speak, — that language, that tone which love has recourse to when it wishes to express itself most cautiously and moderately;

\* This remark of Lessing is in answer to the following lines by Colley Cibber: —

"From English plays, Zara's French author, fired,  
Confessed his Muse beyond herself inspired;  
From racked Othello's rage he raised his style,  
And snatched the brand that lights this tragic pile." — TRANS.

when it is careful to say nothing but what it can be responsible for in the presence of prudish sophistry and cold criticism. But the best chancery clerk does not always know most of the secrets of government. Or if Voltaire really has the same deep insight into the nature of love which Shakespeare possessed, at least he has not developed his knowledge in this work, and the poem remains far inferior to the poet." It is on this occasion that Lessing refers the Germans, with enthusiastic recommendations, to Wieland's translation of Shakespeare; which, in spite of its defects, is still a production "from whose beauty much is yet to be learned before its blemishes so offend us that we demand a new translation."

After the criticism of *Zaïre*, the weaknesses of which he leaves a Dutch critic to expose more fully,\* he defends the two French poets Thomas Corneille and Du Belloy against the strictures of Voltaire, and uses this opportunity to establish the relation of historic reality to poetry. We have already seen that, in the critique of *Semiramis*, he declared historical truth to be, for the dramatic poet, a means, and not an end. In speaking of Du Belloy's *Zelmire*, which was an original creation of the author, a French critic had unduly subordinated this class of fictitious dramas to those which are founded on fact; and Voltaire had worried the younger Corneille, in his *Essex*, with chronology and history. Lessing defends both these writers. In regard to the *Zelmire*, he appeals to Aristotle, who decided long ago how far the tragic poet must heed historical truth; namely, in so far as it resembles a well-arranged

\* Reference is here made to Frederic Duim's work entitled *Zatre, bekeerde Turkinne. Treurspel*. Amsterdam, 1745.—TRANS.

story with which he can unite his own purposes. "The tragic poet does not use history because it has taken place, but because it has so taken place that he could scarcely have invented it better for his present plans. If he find this adaptation, by chance, in a real event, then the event is welcome to him; but to rummage long and deep in historical records for a suitable situation does not pay for the trouble. And how many persons are cognizant of each occurrence? If we wish only to prove the probability of a statement from the fact that it has happened, why should we not accept an imaginary story as a history whose witnesses are unknown to us? What is it that above all else makes a narrative credible? Is it not its internal probability? And is it not a matter of indifference whether this probability be confirmed by traditions which have never yet come to our knowledge, or by none at all? It is assumed, without reason, that a collateral function of the theatre is to preserve the memory of great men. This is the office of history, but not of the theatre. We are to learn in the theatre, not what this or that man has done, but what every man of a certain disposition will do under certain circumstances. The purpose of tragedy is far more philosophical than that of history; and it is degraded from its true dignity when it is made a mere panegyric of illustrious men, or perverted to foster national pride."

Lessing resumes the same theme in opposition to Voltaire's criticism of the *Rodogune* of the elder, and the *Essex* of the younger Corneille, in order to give it still fuller development. Voltaire had reproached the poet with the above-mentioned chronological and historical

errors. Lessing shows him that he himself, in this criticism, has committed as great ones, and closes with these words : "The whole tragedy of Corneille is a romance : if it is pathetic (that is, in Lessing's use of the term, if the action represented has a tragical interest), is it any less so because the poet has employed historical names ? The true poet chooses historical names, not in order to derive from these his characters, but because the characters which history attributes to them correspond, more or less, to those which he wishes to represent. \* \* \* It is not the mere facts, the circumstances of time and place, but the characters of the persons through whom the facts have become real that cause the poet to prefer this or that event." And here, in answer to the question how far the poet may deviate from historical truth, Lessing lays down the great æsthetical law, "In everything not pertaining to the characters, so far as he pleases. Only let the characters be sacred to him : to strengthen these, to show them in their best light, is all that he is permitted to do by way of original addition ; the smallest essential change would do away with the reason why they have these, and not other, names ; and nothing is more offensive than a plan for which we can assign no reason." Or, as he expresses himself in another place, "The least change of character destroys the individuality, and substitutes other persons, impostors, who usurp names which do not belong to them, and palm themselves off for what they are not." It is evident that such treatment of an historical character as Goethe has allowed himself in *Egmont*, would have been rejected by Lessing as unconditionally as it was by Schiller, and for the same reason. Lessing fre-

quently returns to this important subject ; and always with the same recognition of the entire freedom of the poet in all that concerns, not the historical characters themselves, but only the "facts." He establishes this freedom by the remark that if the characters are closely observed, the facts, so far as they are a consequence of the characters, will naturally occur in nearly the same sequence ; whilst, on the other hand, one and the same fact may be derived from wholly different characters ; and by the second proposition, that the instructive element consists, not in the mere facts, but in the knowledge that these characters, under these circumstances, will produce such facts. Events are accidental, and may be common to several persons : characters, on the contrary, are essential and peculiar. He does not forget, however, in deference to the famous utterance of Aristotle, that the poetic truth of tragedy stands much higher, and is of much greater intrinsic worth, than historical truth, to lay the greatest stress on that freedom of the poet, in accordance with which genius shapes its creations to suit a world of its own—"a world in which contingencies are combined in another form, but are yet as closely united as in real life ; a world in which causes and effects follow each other in a new order, but yet aim as directly at universal efficiency ; in short, a world whose presiding genius, in imitation of Divinity itself, displaces, exchanges, diminishes, increases the proportions of the present order of things, in order to construct therefrom a system of its own, with which its purposes may blend."

This profound conception of poetry and of its relation to historical truth to which Lessing's contemporaries

could not look up without dizziness, was finally crowned by the judgment that poetry alone, and not history, acquaints us with the innermost heart of man; that, as Goethe said of Shakespeare, it is only in the tragic poets that we learn how men feel, and therefore the tragic poet cannot use the self-contradictory characters of history as illustrations. If, in our days, a developed system of æsthetics has answered that question concerning objective truth and its limit, with the proposition that historical material in the hand of the poet "has to subject itself to every enlargement and elimination, so long as this is not done in opposition to its nature,"\* we see here that Lessing is in harmony with this decision, which will be brought forward frequently hereafter.

For the present we must return to his criticism of Voltaire, which we have nearly lost sight of while considering that important conclusion which Lessing knew how to derive from it.

We shall speak hereafter of the touching comedy "Nanine," in which the French poet had dramatized the story of Richardson's Pamela, and which must have been a favorite play at that time, since it was repeated four times in six weeks.† The last tragedy of Voltaire which Lessing dissected was Merope. This analysis is, in all respects, a masterpiece and model of dramaturgical criticism; as it is also the most complete of all the treatises which the dramaturgy contains. Lessing spared the idolized poet no humiliation. With merciless acuteness he exposes all his poetic and human infirmities; which, in this piece, appear in the most

\* Vischer, *Æsthetik*, II. 363.

† Hettner's *Literaturgeschichte d. achtzehn. Jahr.* I. 445.

glaring light. He shows that Voltaire does not himself observe the rules which he and the critics of his nation lay down as essential; and that, whilst he understands thoroughly how to make the fetters of art as light and loose as possible for himself, he nevertheless moves, for the most part, so awkwardly and heavily, and with such contortions, "that one might believe his every limb was chained to a special clog." Since this was precisely the point of view from which the æsthetical writers of that time chiefly considered tragedy, and about which the admirers of the French theatre made the loudest noise, Lessing determines to make an example, in this respect, of Voltaire's *Merope*. He shows in the most striking manner how comfortable the poet made himself with regard to the unities of time and place; and how, in his childish endeavor to fulfil the letter of the law, he had committed innumerable offences against its spirit; how he evinces no sense for the continuity of the scenes, no conscience for assigning correct motives; and how, like all the other poets of his nation, he is eager only to make a surface compromise with the rules of his art, instead of observing them in the sense of the ancients. With pointed brevity he develops the true significance of the unities among ancient writers; and closes the discussion with words which must have been a clap of thunder for all admirers of French æsthetics, and of the theory of the drama. "Yet—it disgusts me to dwell longer on these elements. For all that I care, Voltaire's *Merope* may endure eight days, and be played at seven places in Greece! Would, however, that it only possessed beauties which could make me forget these pedantries!"

But it is deficient in these required beauties. "The strictest regularity cannot compensate for the slightest error in the characters;" and it is the characters of Voltaire's tragedy, whose "incongruity, insipid frenzy, ridiculous rodomontade, and refined cannibalism, intended for tragic greatness, he now exposes; together with the nonsensical structure of the action itself, with its patchwork of mere petty tricks."

Voltaire aimed, in these tricks, to excite surprise in the spectator. This gives Lessing an opportunity, in accordance with the opinion of Diderot, to show the difference between surprise and suspense. He calls the first a poor pleasure. "Why is it necessary for the poet to surprise *us*? He may surprise his *personages* as much as he will; we shall all be ready to take our part in it, however long we may have foreseen what must come unexpectedly upon *them*. Indeed, our participation will be all the more lively and strong the longer and more confidently we have foreseen the issue." Who does not see that herein Lessing hits the very heart of the old tragic poetry; especially that of Sophocles, which was based upon the like psychological conduct of Homer? In fact, he immediately makes an application of the principle in justification of the prologues which preface the tragedies of Euripides, and which so displeased the critics of Lessing's time. Nay, he does not hesitate to adduce this peculiarity of Euripides in revealing to the spectators, long beforehand, all the misfortune which was to overtake his characters, as one of the reasons why Aristotle has called him the greatest of tragic poets.

Finally, Lessing shows how empty and undeserved



was Voltaire's over-estimate of himself which led him to consider that in this play he had, if possible, surpassed even Euripides. And yet Lessing recognized the faults of the Grecian poet as clearly as did those later writers who, after the example of Schlegel, detracted from his merits. But the same penetration which enabled him, long before the discovery of a didascalian notice,\* to perceive in the *Alcestis* of this poet a merry satiric play, rather than a tragedy, caused him to recognize also the poetic depth and tragic sublimity of the man whom Socrates counted among his dearest friends; and he demonstrated to the vain Frenchman, who affected to excel Euripides, "that every step which, in his *Merope*, he had ventured to take aside from the track of the gifted Greek, had been a misstep." But Voltaire's piece appears defective even when compared with the *Merope* of the Italian poet,† from which he plagiarized so shamelessly; and all his variations, with one exception, are so many deteriorations.

It fares still worse with the sage of Ferney in his attempt to cite Aristotle in his favor; whom he scarcely knew, except by hearsay. Voltaire had asserted that Aristotle, "in his immortal *Poetics*," declared the recognition between *Merope* and her son to be the most interesting moment of the whole Grecian stage. It was easy for Lessing to show that not a word of this assertion is contained in the works of the ancient philosopher. He adjoins this correction to the previous interpretation

\* Bernhardt, Griech. Lit. II. 871. The *didascalie* (*διδασκαλίαι*) were brief critical and chronological notices of the drama, written by the Greeks, and especially by Aristotle. — TRANS.

† Francis Scipio Maffei, soldier and poet; born at Verona, 1675; died there 1755. His tragedy *Merope* appeared in 1713. — TRANS.

of a section of the Aristotelian Poetics, which treats of the number and perfection of tragic fables and tragic collisions. The French critics had accused Aristotle of a self-contradiction. Lessing proved that no such contradiction existed, and that Aristotle was perfectly consistent.\* We cannot pursue the demonstration further in this place; and, indeed, it is not necessary. The principal fact is, that Lessing, in his criticism of the dramas of Voltaire (to whose poetical abilities, however, he did ample justice), directed so powerful a blow against the æsthetical authority of *la grande nation* and its gifted representative, that he put an end to its influence in Germany forever.

Lessing's next attack was upon the *Rodogune* of the great Corneille; which was considered by its author as his masterpiece. For a hundred years it had been greatly admired in France, and in all Europe; and Voltaire alone had ventured to express some doubts as to the excellence of the work.

Lessing first analyzes Corneille's method in the elaboration of the material. He shows, in contrast, how a true poet would have proceeded; for "genius loves simplicity, wit loves complication; the natural course of an action, which attracts genius, frightens away bunglers." The application of these propositions to Corneille follows naturally. Genius, when impregnated with historical materials, "can be occupied only with events which are the regular workings of cause and effect." To reduce these; to balance one against the other; to exclude everywhere the accidental; to see

\* Ed. Müller, *Geschichte der Theorie der Kunst bei den Alten*, II. 153-156. Vischer, *Æsth.* II. 313.

that all incidents are so appropriate that the results could not be otherwise; this is his business. Wit, on the contrary (by which term Lessing always means speculative understanding, in antithesis to creative genius), is contented with events that are merely identical in time. To combine these; to so twist and entangle their threads that we see them continually shifting, and are thrown from one perplexity into another, — this is all that wit can do. The product of such poetry of contiguity Lessing compares, with striking originality, to the changeable texture of the overshot web; which reflects different colors according to the beholder's point of view. Such a variegated texture, of an intellectual fabric, is, in his opinion, Corneille's *Rodogune* — a composition entirely devoid of truth, nature, and probability, in characters and motives; and sustained by a complication of intrigues which are utterly confusing to the mind. And these fictitious productions of the poet's imagination are the more worthless, because they have no definite purpose. "For the evidence of a creative mind is not mere invention, but invention with an aim." The true dramatic poet produces a tragical effect by the art of his arrangement, through the necessary working of his motive forces; while Corneille, in striving for the same object, piles horror upon horror; and seeks to attain sublimity, in vain, by this accumulation of the unnatural.

Lessing thinks, therefore, that Corneille should be called, not "the Great," but *the Monstrous*; "for nothing is great which is not true;" and abstract vice, as depicted by Corneille, does not exist; and is, consequently, untragical. Lessing's indignation at such

blunders in æsthetics sometimes finds vent in expressions which may have shocked his contemporaries ; for whom his Luther-like quaintness of speech, such as the indication of horror by the hair standing on end, was too strong.\* Thus he says of the heroine of Corneille's tragedy, that she is nothing but an ugly, detestable woman, who sputters and rants, and deserves the strongest cell in a madhouse !

Corneille is the creator and model of the classical drama of France. Lessing therefore struck at the root, when he demonstrated that the greatest tragic poet of the French had constructed tragedy on an entirely false principle ; whose basis was an incorrect conception of the doctrine of Aristotle, and of the nature of the tragic element. It was Lessing's duty then to place in its true light that doctrine of the great master in which he believed as firmly as in the Elements of Euclid ; and this investigation forms, in fact, the burden of the Hamburg Dramaturgy. A brief review of his argument may be useful and instructive, although modern æsthetics have advanced so far that the authority even of an Aristotle is obsolete, and this whole discussion possesses now only an historical interest.†

\* Klotz, Deutsche Allg. Bibl. IV. 511, 12.

† Vischer, *Æsthetik*, I. 328.

## CHAPTER VI.

## ARISTOTLE AND THE PRINCIPLE OF TRAGEDY.

**F**ROM Aristotle the French claimed to have derived the fundamental principle of their classical tragedy; from Aristotle Lessing proved the falsity of their principles, and the consequent spuriousness of their tragedy. For Lessing, whose whole intellectual training was built upon the ancients, could only have rejoiced that his adversaries should themselves transfer the contest to a field which he commanded with the mastery of penetrating insight and profoundest understanding. Besides, Aristotle's Poetics was regarded by him as an irreversible canon in respect to the system of dramatic poetry, and especially of tragedy. Not, indeed, because it was Aristotle who "had deduced from the numerous masterpieces of the Greek stage" these laws and definitions, — for (as he once said), he could soon overcome the prestige of Aristotle, if he only knew how to get the better of his principles, — but because he found the results of his own thought confirmed by the conclusions of the ancient philosopher. Aristotle's definition of tragedy, if we follow Lessing in particularizing only the essential points, is as follows: Tragedy is the imitated representation of a dignified and significant action, which is unfolded by means of persons acting before our eyes, and not by means of narration;

and this representation produces, through sympathy and fear, the purification of all the passions connected with these emotions.

The French Corneille and his follower Crébillon had, in the first place, so perverted this definition, "in which the negative emotional elements of tragic poetry are expressed with inimitable simplicity and sharpness," \* that, instead of the original idea, they had substituted the conception of *terror*; and thus put a definite kind of fear—the sudden fear of surprise—in place of the sentiment intended by Aristotle.

Thereby a highway had been thrown open, in poetic practice, for the application of the terrible and horrible in tragedy; through incomprehensible misdeeds, premeditated horrors, absolute inhuman wickedness, exulting in crimes and ghastly hideousness. The French tragedian Crébillon even bore the surname of "the terrible," as a title of honor; and, in support of such proceedings, appeal was made to the unassailable authority of Aristotle; although, in truth, this philosopher had rejected such materials as absolutely untragic. German tragedy had dutifully adopted the French view; and Lessing's friend Weisse had carried it to its extreme in his *Richard III.* This horrible production of the gentle-hearted children's friend of Leipsic was taken by Lessing as a basis for the refutation of the false theory. He shows first that the French and their German imitators "have not understood at all what kind of fear is meant by Aristotle." The fear that he refers to is not a mere modification of sympathy, not sympathetic terror, which comes upon us at the sudden sight

\* Vischer, *Æsth.* I. 329.

of a sorrow which threatens another ; but it is fear for ourselves, lest the misfortunes suspended over the heads of the persons in the tragical action may strike us also. In a word, the fear which, according to Aristotle, is awakened in us by tragedy, is "sympathy having reference to ourselves." Even so the sympathy which Aristotle calls the second fundamental emotion of tragedy, is the sentiment which contains the possibility of a fear for ourselves. Tragic sympathy, therefore, necessarily includes fear, and both are phases of one passion.

It is Lessing's great merit to have first cleared up and established forever this profound conception of the ancient philosopher. "It all depends," he says, "upon the conception which Aristotle has formed of sympathy. He believed that the evil which is to be the object of our sympathy must necessarily be of such a nature that we should be obliged to fear it for ourselves or for our friends. Where this fear does not exist, there can be no sympathy. For neither he who has been so crushed by misfortune that he has nothing further to fear for himself, nor he who thinks himself so perfectly happy that no harm can reach him, — neither the despairing nor the presumptuous, — is wont to feel sympathy with others. He explains, therefore, sympathy and fear by their corresponding effects. 'Everything,' he says, 'is fearful to *us* which, if it had occurred, or were about to occur, to another, would excite our sympathy ; and everything which we find worthy of sympathy is what we should fear were it threatening us. It is not enough that the unhappy man with whom we are to sympathize may not deserve his misfortune, although he may have drawn it upon himself by some weakness ; his tortured

innocence, or, rather, his too severely visited guilt, is lost upon us, is not able to excite our sympathy, if we see no possibility of his suffering ever coming upon ourselves.' This possibility may, however, be recognized even as a great probability, if the poet do not make his criminal worse than men are commonly accustomed to be; if he allow him to think and act as we, in his circumstances, should be likely to think and act; in short, if the character is portrayed as of the same human nature with ourselves. From this likeness arises the fear that our fates may be similar, and it is this fear which ripens sympathy. Tragic fear, therefore, becomes sympathy when the dreaded evil comes home to us. It is future sympathy; and has nothing in common with that physical fear which remains fear, and when the threatened evil strikes us, passes on, not into sympathy, but into terror, which concerns only ourselves; and, on the other hand, the tragic sympathy of which Aristotle speaks is not crude sympathy, but the remains of a fear once endured — a sympathy which has its basis in the tragical feeling of universal human nature." \*

If this exposition be understood, it is easy to see how the perverted theory of Corneille and the whole structure of French tragedy were demolished at one stroke; for not only was the conception of terror thrown out of tragedy, but that misunderstanding of Aristotle's definition of the two tragical emotions — which led to the formation of two distinct classes of tragedies, one calculated to excite sympathy, the other fear, or, as they expressed it, "terror" — was brought forward in all its absurdity. In this system Corneille had been fighting

\* Vischer, *Æsth.* I. 330.



for his life ; for he himself had, in his tragedies, brought martyrs upon the stage, and described them as perfect characters ; and again, in other pieces, he had introduced the most detestable monsters ; whereas Aristotle had condemned both species as useless for tragedy, because they could excite neither fear nor sympathy. And since Corneille was unwilling to sacrifice either his tragedies or the authority of Aristotle, he was obliged to resort to the expedient of fathering upon the ancient philosopher the fundamentally erroneous idea that *one* of these two tragic passions may suffice for a tragedy. It was easy for Lessing to show the absurdity of this assertion ; which, in spite of its manifest opposition to the plainest words of Aristotle, had hitherto been regarded as his law, and therefore irreversible in France and Germany.

The second important principle in Aristotle's definition of tragedy is the "purification of the passions." This principle had also heretofore been greatly misunderstood. Corneille had, in a very crude and material manner, received it in the sense of moral hinderance ; which makes fear the instrument through which sympathy should produce in the spectator the purification of all possible passions — of anger, hatred, love, ambition, &c. — represented in the tragedy.

Lessing showed that Aristotle had not the remotest thought of such a process, and that the passions which were to be purified through sympathy and fear were "our sympathy and our fear themselves." It is a *similia similibus curantur*, a sort of spiritual homœopathy. But the Aristotelian purification of these passions takes place, first, by changing, through the poet's art, their pain into pleasure.

"The affections are purified, inasmuch as they are excited by an action which is not real, but only represented ; and from which, therefore, the material element is eliminated."\* It takes place, secondly, through the necessity that the spectator fears and suffers only in imagination ; and therefore the material element is eliminated from his sympathy. With great acuteness Lessing demonstrated that the secret of the Aristotelian thought concerning the purification of those affections is to be sought in their mutual inclusion and transition into each other ; and that whoever wishes fully to exhaust the meaning of the principle must show how tragic sympathy can and does really purify our sympathy ; tragic fear, our fear ; tragic sympathy, our fear ; and tragic fear, our sympathy. And, indeed, each of these four points includes again a double case ; for since this purification depends on the transformation of passions into virtuous perfections, — and, according to Aristotle, every virtue is the mean between two extremes, — so tragedy must be able to purify us from extremes of both sympathy and fear. "Tragic sympathy must purify the soul, not only of him who feels too much, but also of him who feels too little sympathy. Tragic fear must purify, not only his soul who fears no misfortune, but also his whom every misfortune, even the most remote and improbable, fills with anxiety. Likewise, tragic sympathy, with regard to fear, must check one mind and rouse another ; and so, again, tragic fear as regards sympathy." †

\* Müller, *Geschichte der Theorie*, &c. II. 62 ; Vischer, *Æsth.* I. 329.

† See Müller, II. 68. A full treatment of this subject can be found in the Introduction to Stahr's Translation of Aristotle's *Poetics* (Stuttgart, 1860), and in the treatise *Aristoteles und die Wirkung der Tragödie* by the same author (Berlin, 1859).

Well may it be said that in Aristotle's principle, thus understood, lies an indication of that morally elevating effect which the tragical exerts upon the human soul. Modern æsthetics have pointed out that the old Hellenic thinker has also considered the nature of tragedy, when he demands that the sufferings of great men, without corresponding guilt, shall be represented; because the tragic pain of the spectator becomes thereby great, sublime, universal, when he sees that the greatest and best are not exempted from the general fate. But herein lies the limit of Aristotle's definition; for it lacks the development of the conception of guilt, and with it the conception of "absolute justice; the contemplation of which transforms sympathy and fear into essentially different feelings." \*

But to return to Lessing. What is the practical conclusion which he derives from his development of the nature of the tragedy? Simply this: that not only the Germans, but also the French, "who boast of having had for a hundred years a theatre, yea, the best theatre in all Europe, have as yet had no true tragedy;" that their whole drama, measured by the standard of Aristotle's æsthetics, contains no tragedies deserving the name! And why not? Because the effects which these plays produce are wholly different from those which belong to the essence of tragedy. Above all others, it is Corneille, as Lessing says, who did the most harm, and exercised the worst influence over French tragedians. For Racine has misled only by his example, but Corneille by his productions and precepts at once; the proof of which latter assertion may be read in Lessing's

\* Vischer, I. 339.

writings. He shows how Corneille has stated the definitions of Aristotle with falseness and obliquity, "which are all calculated with reference to the highest effect of tragedy;" and because he found them too rigid, has depleted, mutilated, perverted, and neutralized them until they could be made to accord, in some measure, with his own tragedies.

This manner of "presupposing his own cause to be the cause of Truth" is chastised by Lessing with cutting irony; and the result of such presumption, in the utter misconception of the tragic, and in its perversion to unnatural abstractions and empty bombast, is forcibly demonstrated by reference to Corneille's own tragedies. And it was precisely these faults that Lessing wished to reform. "Nothing is more chaste and becoming," he says, "than unadorned nature. Coarseness and disorder are as far removed from it as display and bombast from the sublime. The same sense which perceives declension in the one will not fail to recognize it in the other. The pompous poet is therefore, in truth, the most vulgar. Both errors are inseparable; and no kind of literature offers so great temptations to these faults as tragedy.

## CHAPTER VII.

## FURTHER DEDUCTIONS.

FROM the evolution and establishment of the Aristotelian principle of tragedy, Lessing proceeded to deduce a series of most important conclusions; of which we must now give a connected summary. First, the excising from tragedy of the so-called perfect characters. On the very first pages of the *Dramaturgy* he had declared himself opposed to the specifically Christian tragedy, with its entirely innocent martyrs for heroes. In the polemic against Corneille he resumes the same thought, and, by reference to Aristotle's definition of the "horrible" (*μιαρόν*), establishes it in a manner which has fixed this point forever, and made Lessing's decision a fundamental law of æsthetics.\*

The same is true of his definition of evil; which already, in *Laokoön*, under the designation of the ugly, he had admitted into the realm of the beautiful, under the condition that it should be fearful. When he rejected Weisse's *Richard III.*, he did not thereby condemn Shakespeare's *Richard*, but only that monster, boasting of his depravity, from which the Leipzig poet had eliminated every human trait, every connection with the species, and transformed the Shakespearian creation into a hideous bugbear. It is not supposable that Les-

\* Vischer, I. 274.

sing, as Guhrauer imagines,\* included both authors in his annihilating criticism; that he struck Weisse, and meant Shakespeare; since he expressly holds up the English to the German poet, as a "mirror" in which to recognize the faults of his work.

It is true that Lessing has neglected to carry out the parallel between Weisse's and Shakespeare's Richard. But it must be remembered that the *Dramaturgy* is a torso; and also that Lessing is very suggestive, even when he is silent, or apparently so. It has by no means escaped his sharp eye and deep feeling, that in Shakespeare this primitive picture of wickedness does not step out of the frame of humanity, and that more than one trait in his Richard proves his brotherhood to man; that "the deep necessity for love which Richard, like Macbeth, expresses before his destruction, excites our inmost sympathy; and that, although we consent to the punishment of such characters, we yet tremble; knowing that the demon whom Nemesis thus overtakes slumbers also in ourselves." †

Strictly speaking, then, Lessing was, in this case, essentially in harmony with Aristotle; although the latter was fully penetrated with the antique republican spirit in excluding "the completely bad man" and his destruction from tragedy, because he saw in such a character only the miserable scapegrace whose ruin could excite neither sympathy nor fear." ‡ Upon this side the *Poetics* of Aristotle rest upon a temporary basis, determined by politics. But the ancient thinker has closely bordered upon the tragical element of evil in a passage hitherto overlooked by all his interpreters; §

\* Guhrauer, II. 317.

† Vischer, I. 307.

‡ Vischer, I. 306.

§ *Poetics*, chap. 18, § 6.

wherein he lays down the proposition, "that it is indeed tragic, and excites human sympathy, when the brave but unjust man [Richard III., for instance] is conquered, and the cunning but bad man is deceived." A third important decision was in reference to the necessary unity and consistency of dramatic characters. This is set forth as an absolute requisite in art; as opposed to the phenomena of every-day reality, which can in no case be regarded as a standard, or even as an excuse for the poet. To this subject belongs also the difference of characters, and their significance in tragedy and comedy.

In comedy the characters are all important, and the situations are only means of expression to these; whilst in tragedy the action is the essential thing, because it is from thence that the essential element of tragedy springs. "Therefore similar situations give like tragedies, but not like comedies. On the contrary, like characters produce like comedies, whilst in tragedies the characters scarcely ever come into account." Finally, Lessing thought to be able, from the theory of Aristotle, to fix even the dramatic form of tragedy; since he showed that the dramatic form is the one in which alone sympathy and fear, the two great fundamental emotions of tragedy, are excited, or, at least, are excited in the highest degree. But in this attempt he fell into contradiction with his Aristotle; to say nothing of the fact that thereby the dramatic form was demonstrated to be necessary for tragedy only, and not for comedy also. For whilst Lessing believed the "actual looking on" to be a necessary element in the excitement of fear and sympathy, and the rousing of these

feelings by means of mere narration, to be adopted from Aristotle, the great philosopher says exactly the contrary.\*

It was the principal task of Lessing to subvert the authority of the French classical tragedy; because, while it had obscured the simple greatness and sublimity of the old Hellenic tragedy, it at the same time barred the way to the genius of Shakespeare. If, in removing these obstructions, whereby he became the emancipator of the German drama, he, in the conflict, did injustice to French literature, it was, as the wise proverb says, because "moderation comes only after victory." This victory must first be won, in order to verify the proud words of Schiller, which that great poet laid, as a well-deserved laurel crown, upon Lessing's Dramaturgy, when he sang of the German theatre of his day, in lines addressed to Goethe:—

"We consecrate this stage to native art.  
No foreign god shall find an altar here;  
For we can show with proud, courageous heart  
A laurel green from German Pindus near.  
Even in art's highest temple, without fear,  
Has German genius boldly claimed a part,  
And, led by Greeks and Shakespeare's glorious name,  
Has followed after more illustrious fame!"

It was the work of the liberator Lessing, in his Dramaturgy, that prepared the way, and made it possible for German genius to follow after this "more illustrious fame."

How highly Schiller esteemed Lessing's worth is evident from a passage of his correspondence with Goethe, to whom he wrote, in the year 1799, "I am

\* Aristotle's Poetics, 14, § 1.



reading Lessing's Dramaturgy. There is no question that, among all the Germans of his time, he was the clearest, as well as the most liberal, thinker upon art, and the one who kept most constantly before him its necessary conditions. In reading him one might really believe that the golden age of German taste is already past. For how few recent judgments concerning art deserve to be placed by the side of his !”

It was Schiller, too, who agreed with Lessing in his high estimate of Aristotle ; whom he calls a Rhadamanthus, as well for those who adhere servilely to external form, as for those who ignore form altogether ; since in all his definitions he is evidently far more concerned about essence than form, while he nevertheless deduces from the nature of the poem, and especially of the tragedy, its unchangeable character. Although hitherto we have seen Lessing directing his merciless criticism against the French tragedy, in order to prove that “no nation has more entirely misunderstood the rules of the ancient drama than the French,” we find him also willing to acknowledge the worth of what this nation had produced in comedy and the domestic drama. Not only did he assign to Molière a place by the side of Shakespeare, and defend the great comic poet against the depreciation of his own countryman Voltaire, and the comedy itself against the foolish attacks of Rousseau, but he also awarded due honor to the later French comic poets Detouches and Regnard, Quinault and Marivaux, at the same time pointing out their faults and deficiencies ; and, with regard to the so-called pathetic comedy (*la comédie larmoyante*), he allowed himself, as is well known, in opposition to his former

unfavorable judgment, to be hurried into an over-estimate of this class of plays, through his predilection for the poet Diderot ; while he shows himself wholly emancipated from the prestige of the critic Diderot, whom he had formerly placed by the side of Aristotle. Finally, Lessing opened to his countrymen a new and unknown realm in the beauties of the Spanish drama ; of whose richness and originality no German, at that time, had even a presentiment. When Lessing wrote the *Dramaturgy*, not a single drama of this literature had been translated, or even epitomized. Lessing, who, during his first residence at Berlin, had made himself familiar with the language, employed the opportunity offered him in the rich Spanish collection of a friend, a merchant of Hamburg, to appropriate the treasures of its dramatic literature. He studied Calderon and Lope ; he read the comedies of Cervantes ; and in his criticism of the *Essex* of Thomas Corneille, he made a complete analysis of the Spanish tragedy of the same name, whose author is still unknown, in order to give his nation a conception of this foreign style. But, not in the least misled by the joy of a discoverer, which, in feebler minds, would be apt to cause an over-estimate of the new-found treasures, Lessing's judgment of the weaknesses, as well as of the excellences, of the Spanish drama was so just and accurate that it remains in force even unto this day. He was disposed to apply to these productions the saying of the old Hellenic poet, in reference to similar compositions ; "the half is greater than the whole." The only piece that he felt any desire to transplant to the German theatre was Calderon's *Alcade* of

Zalamea ; and this drama is still regarded as Calderon's best work, and was actually elaborated for the German stage by Schröder, probably at the suggestion of Lessing. It was also in calling attention to the peculiarities of the Spanish drama, especially its blending of the comic and tragic, that Lessing reached the important theme of the imitation of nature by art. Wieland, in his romance of Agathon, which Lessing upheld to his indifferent countrymen as a masterpiece, had, like the Spanish poet Lope de Vega, attempted to justify this intermixture by the example of nature and reality. Lessing showed the great error in which both authors had been involved, and, at the same time, placed the doctrine of the imitation of nature through art on its proper basis. In more recent æsthetical works, this question has been settled in the principle that "the product which Nature created, but which has been exposed to changes of every kind through the pressure of disturbing accidents, is restored to its purity by art ; and, thus purified, is repeated in an ideal form, bearing a close resemblance to its prototype, and gifted with like vitality." \*

Lessing's thought is developed in the same direction. "In nature," he says, "there is a reciprocal connection, interchange, and transformation of all things. But this infinite diversity is open to the eye of only an infinite spirit. In order that finite minds may share the enjoyment, they must have received the faculty of setting limits to nature which it does not possess ; of abstracting its parts ; and directing their attention to particular points. We exercise this faculty at every moment of our lives. Without it there would be no life for us.

\* Vischer, *Æsth.* III. 84.

We should feel nothing, because of our too varied feelings; we should be the victims of the present moment; we should dream without knowing whereof we dreamed. It is the mission of art to spare us the necessity of this effort in the realm of the beautiful; to facilitate the fixing of our attention. It abstracts, in reality, all that we wish to abstract from our thoughts concerning one or more objects of nature, either as to time or space; and presents the result so clearly and concisely that only the proper emotions are excited. When we are witnesses of an important and affecting event, we avoid, as far as possible, the diversion caused by the conflict of any less worthy circumstance. We abstract ourselves from such conflict; and it cannot but be offensive to us to find again in art what we wished to set aside in nature."

But whilst Lessing thus showed, from the nature of human sentiments and the powers of the soul, the process of abstraction necessary to an artistic imitation of nature, it did not escape him that art in its highest perfection—in a word, tragedy as revealed in Shakespeare's genius—may claim the right of an exception from this proposition. And so he concludes his development with those memorable words which placed him at once upon the stand-point of romantic poetry: "Only when an event combines, in its progress, all shades of interest, and one not merely succeeds the other, but springs from it of necessity, — when seriousness so immediately begets mirth, and sadness joy, or the reverse, that the abstraction of one from the other becomes impossible, — only then is art exempted from this law, and may even derive advantage from its liberty." What is

1 this but the justification of Shakespeare and of the romantic poetry? to reconcile the idea of which with the classic conception of the beautiful, appears to be, as Guhrauer justly observes, the principal object of Lessing in the *Dramaturgy*.

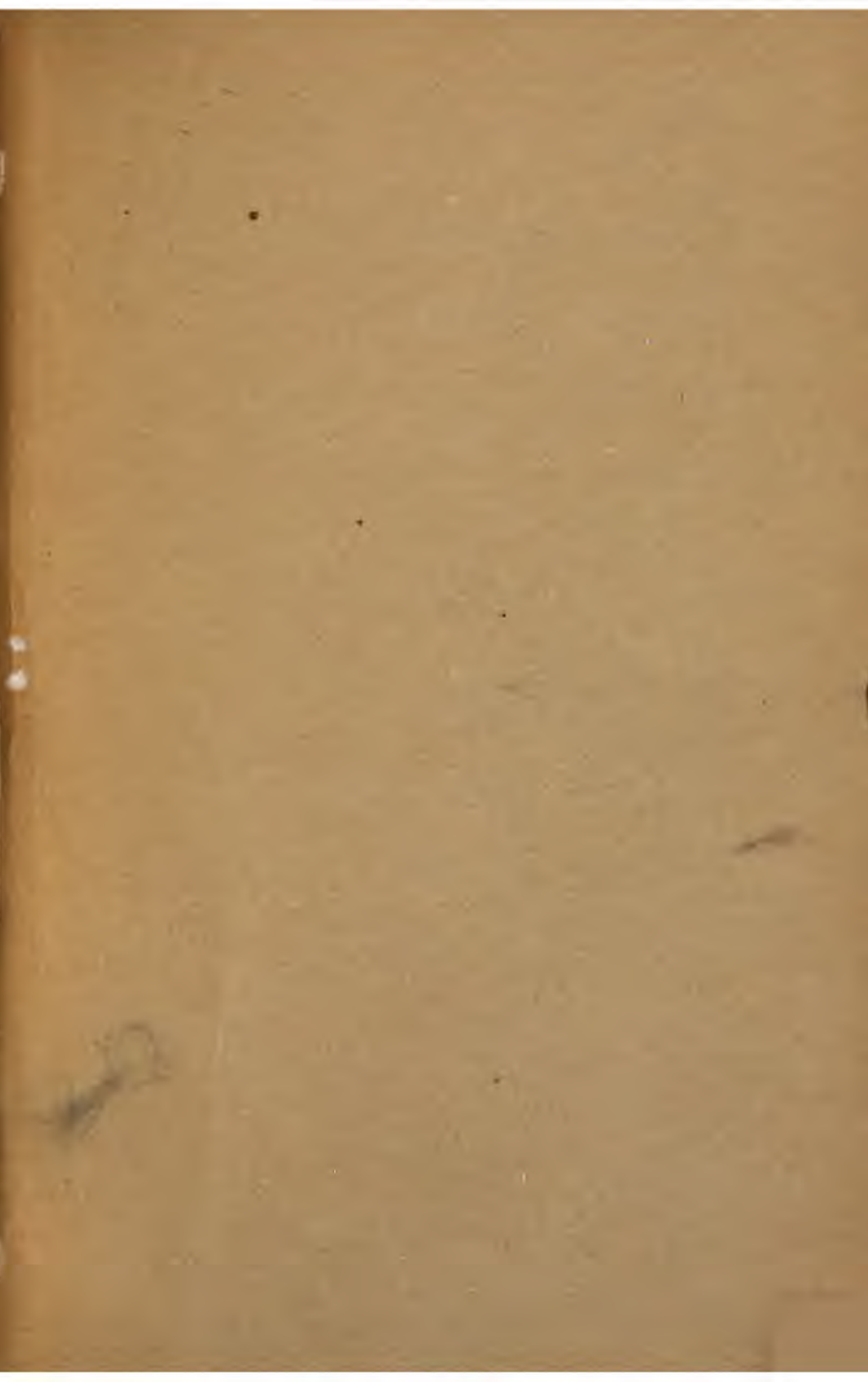
We come now to the close of our attempt to present, in a suggestive manner, the exhaustless riches of Lessing's *Dramaturgy*, and the greatness of his merits respecting the development of his nation's poetic literature. And how could we more worthily conclude than by a reference to the pioneering force with which he conducted the full, deep, fertilizing stream of Shakespeare's genius on to the dry fields of German poetry, and into the shrivelled arteries of the German spirit? What he had hinted at in the *Letters on Literature*, nearly ten years before, — namely, that Shakespeare, judged by the models of the ancients, is a far greater tragic poet than Corneille and Voltaire, — he now carried out in the *Dramaturgy* with the enthusiasm of deepest conviction and the might of a thorough understanding; while, at the same time, he indicated the only right way for all future use and comprehension of the great poet, with the before-mentioned simple maxim, "Shakespeare must be studied, not plundered." It was not Lessing's fault that the champions of Storm-and-Stress of the following years inscribed Shakespeare on their banner as the type and model of all law-and-rule-deriding genius. They might have learned from Lessing, who knew better than they how to appreciate genius, that 1 Shakespeare's productions were in full harmony with the nature of Grecian tragedy and with Aristotle's law.

When Lessing was concluding his *Dramaturgy*, the

Storm-and-Stress period of license could already be felt in the air ; and a presentiment of its sway induced him to delineate the sources of its origin with striking clearness. It was an acquaintance with the English theatre which, as he expresses himself, caused the Germans to make the discovery that "tragedy is capable of an entirely different effect from what Corneille and Racine imparted to it. But, dazzled by this sudden ray of truth, we recoiled to the verge of another abyss. The English plays were evidently deficient in certain rules with which the French had made us familiar. What was the conclusion? That the purpose of tragedy can be attained without these rules ; nay, that it can even be the fault of these rules when it fails of success. And this was true. But with *these* rules men began to confound *all* rules, and to declare it to be pedantry to prescribe to genius what it must and must not do. In short, we were on the point of trifling away all the experiences of the past, and of demanding that each poet should discover for himself a new art.

To check this "fermentation of taste" was the chief aim of the Dramaturgy, as Lessing acknowledged at its close. The revolution which he undertook was essentially a conservative one ; and the great Agitator of the eighteenth century appears here, as everywhere else, the most faithful guardian of all true acquisitions of the past of the human mind.



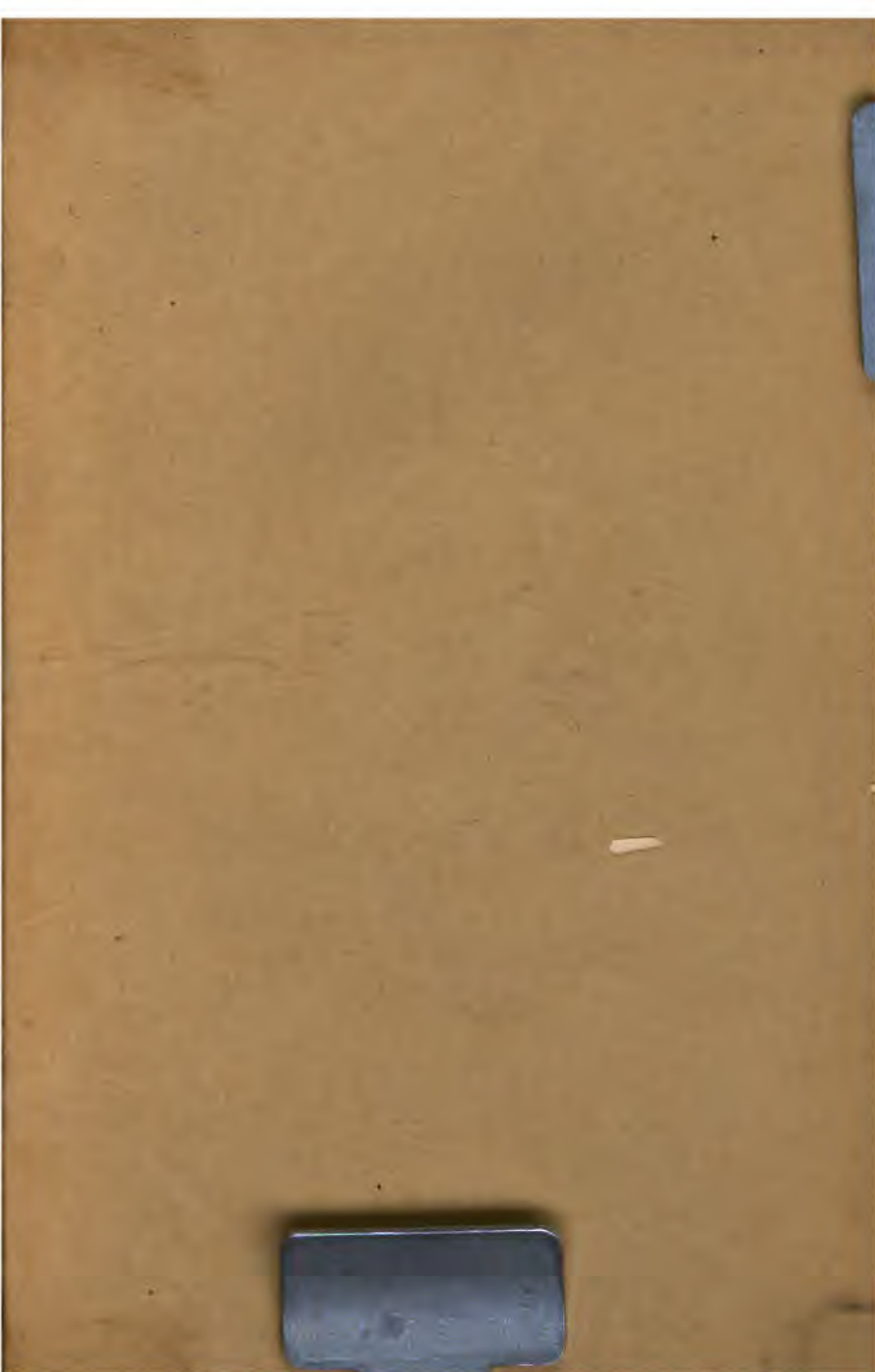




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